



CHAPTER

1



I watched as two guards pulled a thin boy into the arena. His feet left trails in the sand as though two yellow-spotted sand snakes followed his path. The guards chained him to the short center post so he couldn't move more than five arm lengths in any direction. Then they retreated, leaving the boy and his puddled shadow alone to face the crowd.

The boy stood like a lopsided cactus in the sun, with his elbows away from his body to keep the thick metal chains from burning any more skin than necessary.

He couldn't have been more than eight or nine.

Now he'd come to my arena—my home—where I fought each month. And we all were waiting to see if he would leave it alive.

My father rose from his chair. The jeers and shouts of the crowd quieted, leaving only the sound of the breeze drifting in across the desert, shifting and remaking the far-off hills of sand.

My eyes darted back and forth between the two doors that stood shut before the boy. Which door concealed the tiger? It was impossible not to wonder while I waited for my father to speak.

“My people,” he said, “we have before us an accused Desert Boy. One of the very same urchins who plagues our kingdom by stealing from our wells, forcing me to ration what little water we have.” He let the cries die down before continuing. “This

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particular Desert Boy was caught leading a caravan of contraband goods into the city.” He paused while the crowd reacted.

The boy couldn’t even bring himself to face my father. He kept his chin tucked close to his chest. Probably to hide his tears.

I steeled my face. Let him cry. Let him return even the smallest fraction of water he’d taken from us, from our people, over the years. I wouldn’t let the sight of him get to me. It didn’t matter that he was so young. I couldn’t let it matter. If this boy’s only crime had been bringing in forbidden goods, it might be forgivable, even understandable. But he was a Desert Boy, a water thief. And that could never be forgiven.

The drought had hit all of us hard, and yet these boys thought they were above the law, that they had the right to take more than their allotted share. How many more people would live now that there was one less Desert Boy stealing our water? Sacrificing his life would save countless of my people’s lives—people who fought to survive despite the number of times he and his kind raided the wells, people who were dying in the streets from thirst while he and his friends drunk their fill.

I squared my shoulders. Justice needed to be carried out until the water returned and Achra could once again take its place as the thriving oasis it once was. It was the only way we would survive—and if there was anything Achrans were known for, it was surviving. We had turned the harsh desert into a sanctuary for merchants, artisans, and caravans—at least until the water ran out and groups like the Desert Boys formed.

But we would rise again, and until we did, we had to do what was best for the people. That meant making this prisoner face justice.

“But,” my father continued, “this boy claims he was out

hunting for moonstones and stumbled upon the caravan just as my guards arrived.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes, chiding myself for even thinking of giving the boy sympathy. It was unfortunate one of the ever-increasing sandstorms we’d been experiencing hadn’t wiped him out in the desert and saved us the trouble. He may look young, but he was clearly a Desert Boy through and through—using the same excuse they all gave when we caught them. And as the sun rose higher—and the temperature of my blood along with it—heat radiated from the sword sheathed at my side, begging to be unleashed. This boy was clearly trying to slip through our fingers so he could run straight back to our wells and bleed them dry, bleed us dry, make us so weak we were unable to fight back.

We couldn’t let that happen. As the future queen, I couldn’t let that happen.

“We should never have brought him to trial,” I turned and said to my father. When Rodric, my father’s captain of the guard, hadn’t been able to get the location of the other Desert Boys out of the kid, we should’ve kept him locked up. He would’ve broken eventually.

“Kateri,” my father snapped, bluntly cutting off my name as the crowd roared around us. “Control yourself and your tongue.” He pursed his thin lips—ones identical to mine—as he stared down at me.

His eyes said what his lips didn’t. Be in control or someone else will take control. He’d drilled that phrase into me as my fighting trainer over the years. But it’d been a while since he’d scolded me like that. I crossed my arms and sunk back into my seat, pulling my long braid over my shoulder. I tugged at the loose tail, twining the dark strands between my calloused fingers.

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I was in control of myself. One of my mother's killers stood before me—was on the verge of escaping—and I hadn't leapt into the arena to make him pay for his crimes. I ignored the fact this particular boy would have been too young to take part in the raid that killed my mother and baby brother. He was still a Desert Boy. Leading the illegal caravan into the city was the least of his crimes.

"While the desert offers no justice, I do," my father said, turning back to address the boy. "Before you are two unmarked doors. Behind one is the cart of contraband goods, which will be yours to keep should you choose that door. Behind the other door is one of my pet tigers, who will be released into the arena within moments should that door be selected. The decision is yours, and yours alone. But fail to choose, and the tiger will be released." He let his words float around the arena.

For the first time, the boy raised his head and faced the crowd. His eyes held my father's for a moment before swinging to mine. There was a pleading weakness in them that made my stomach churn. How could he help bleed the Achran wells dry and then expect pity from those he caused to suffer?

He wouldn't find any pity here. I leaned forward and stared him down until he turned away.

The boy focused on the doors in front of him. The chains fettering him to the post clanked together as he lifted his arm and pointed to the door on the right.

I snuck a glance at my father's face. He always knew which door hid the tiger, and he couldn't hide the upturn at the edges of his lips that would curl into a smile when the accused picked that door.

No smile played about his lips. My heart flipped faster than

a dune in a sandstorm. I bolted up in my seat. Hot afternoon air grew unbearable in my lungs as I held my breath.

The door creaked open to reveal a cart piled with earthen jars full of still-living spiral snails waiting for nobles to use their shells to flavor their water, bolts of spider silk netting fine enough to catch sand and keep it from coming in windows and doors, and clay containers full of nogen nuts and spiked rainberries waiting to be crushed into spices and perfumes.

“No,” I whispered. And then I was shouting it over and over again. The cry was drowned out by the roaring of the crowd.

I shook my head in disbelief. The desert wouldn't do this to me. It couldn't. My heart pounded in my chest as my stomach twisted at the thought of the boy walking free. Free to raid our wells. Free to attack our guards. Free to cause suffering to those left in the city as water rations were cut more and more because of the never-ending drought that had started before I was even born.

The boy threw his arms into the air and stomped his feet into the sand in celebration, laughing uncontrollably.

It reminded me so much of my mother, of the laugh I would never hear again—the laugh the Desert Boys took away from me. And they would just keep taking things away unless we stopped them. Unless I stopped them.

I pulled my sword out of its scabbard.

I had one hand on the railing, ready to vault into the arena, when my father's hand shot out to stop me. His fingers wrapped around my arm in an iron-like grasp as he gave me a silencing look.

I ground one palm against the searing metal of the railing while the other gripped my sword's hilt. My chest shook with

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rage. “He’s a Desert Boy,” I said through gritted teeth. “We can’t let him escape.”

“Sit down.” My father’s eyes turned cold. When I was little, I couldn’t imagine how anything that icy could exist in the desert.

And now I couldn’t understand what my father was thinking. But I did know what happened when I disobeyed. Ripping my hand away from the railing, I slid back into my seat and dug the tip of my sword into the floor to keep from staring at the smile on the boy’s face. Chunk after chunk of rock chipped away from the crumbling arena. I drilled the blade farther and farther until I couldn’t feel the muscles in my arm.

“Justice has prevailed,” my father shouted. “The boy is free to take the cart and go.”

Guards moved forward to unshackle the boy. He whooped and hollered and kicked sand into a wide arc as he sped toward the cart.

My knuckles turned white around the hilt still in my hands. “There is no justice in this desert,” I said.

“Perhaps justice has been kinder than we thought, Kateri,” my father replied. He motioned, and a figure melted out of the shadows at the top of the arena.

Rodric sauntered down the steps, pausing to bow before my father.

“Your trap is working perfectly,” my father extolled.

Rodric bowed again, but he couldn’t hide the smirk sliding across his lips. He was only a few years older than me, but the tiny scars running up and down his arms and neck—left there by fire-legged flies—spoke to his upbringing. He hadn’t grown up behind curtains of spider silk to keep the flies and sand out. No, he’d grown up at the mercy of the elements.

He'd adopted the closely shaven hair favored by most of the soldiers. Of course, that was after he'd shown up to one of their training sessions months ago, emerging from the tail end of one of the sandstorms as though the desert were depositing him on our doorstep. He'd looked haggard and windblown, with hair down to his shoulders. But appearances had been deceiving; he'd marched up to my father's then captain of the guard and stabbed him before the man could even get a word out. When the other soldiers brought Rodric before my father, he'd stood tall and said that if the head of my father's security was that easy to kill, he should find someone else to fill the job.

Someone like Rodric.

My father had seen something in Rodric and took him on.

But I'd never seen what my father had. My father had been a strict yet even-tempered teacher. When I got injured while training, he'd see to me himself—refusing to let the apothecaries do it. He'd bind up my arm or leg or whatever I'd injured while drilling into me what I'd done wrong. He'd say pain was earned by inattention and lack of skill, that it was up to me to avoid pain by doing better. After he'd bandaged me, he'd make me repeat the move I'd messed up until I could do it perfectly one hundred times in a row. It had been rough at the time—all those nights I wasn't allowed to go to sleep until I'd executed the move flawlessly again and again—but I knew my father did it for me, for us. He wanted me to win, and that meant I had to be the best.

Though when my father handed off my training to Rodric a few months ago, after seeing his skill with a blade, I learned what truly harsh training was. Sure, Rodric conditioned me in ways similar to what my father had, like building up my stamina and strength by having me hang above pits of raw worms that would

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bite into me if I fell in or tying me to a rope during the start of a sandstorm, making me run against the wind. Those I could handle. But unlike my father, Rodric didn't wait for me to bandage my wounds. He'd give me small cuts and then purposefully flick sand toward them.

And he thought everyone fought better when they were mad. So he'd do everything he could to goad me. He'd steal my sandals, making me fight barefoot in the burning sand. He'd shove my face into that same sand, one hand holding my face down while the other tried to bury it, suffocating me. He'd grab me from behind and pull my eyelids open, making me stare into the sun until I could fight free from his grasp.

I hated his methods, preferring a more calculated fight—one where I studied my opponents and found their weaknesses. That's what my father had always taught me. Look for a weakness and exploit it.

So while I couldn't see whatever it was my father valued in Rodric beyond his brute strength, it was obviously something exceptional, because my father had been turning to him more and more these past few months. And I was being left out of decisions. Like this one.

"A trap?" I scanned the arena as people emptied toward the streets. I didn't see any guards waiting to ambush the boy, so I studied my father. He'd seemed oddly calm—oddly indifferent—during the trial. My eyes landed on the doors across the arena. "You put carts behind both doors," I said, wishing it came out more as a question than a statement.

Rodric leaned against the railing and squinted down at me. "Of course."

Heat pulsed through my body. "You let him get away? You're

the captain of the guard. It's your job to catch him. He's not some water beetle you buy in the marketplace that the merchant swears will lead you to some underground spring. No, that boy is a scorpion—you have to squash him while you can so he doesn't crawl away and hide, waiting to sting you when you're not looking."

Rodric clenched his jaw before replying, "It's better to let one scorpion go when it'll lead you to all the rest, so you can kill them where they sleep."

I started to retort, but my father interrupted. "Rodric, send as many guards as you think necessary. I want their hideout found and destroyed." Once his order had been conveyed, he moved toward the exit.

Rodric turned and motioned for two guards to come forward. He gave them brief instructions before the men headed out after the boy.

I shook my head. If that child had any brains, he'd already ditched the cart and melted back into the desert like the loathsome creature he was. Those guards would never find him—especially since they were scared of venturing past the crumbling city wall. They'd seen too many of their comrades carried back in with the yellow-and-black veins that accompanied a bite from a yellow-spotted sand snake. Or they simply didn't return at all.

No. If that boy was to be stopped, it had to be someone who wasn't afraid of the desert. It had to be me.

I slowly backed away, tracing my fingers along the railing, hoping Rodric wouldn't notice my path took me closer to the same door the boy had pulled the cart through. Once I was far enough away from Rodric and my father, it would be an easy leap into the arena and a quick jog across the sand. I was calculating my chances of making it when a shadow fell across my back.

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"I know what you're thinking," Rodric said. He was standing so close I could feel the heat radiating from him despite the afternoon heat. "You plan on following that Desert Boy."

I turned to face him, pushing my back against the railing. It shuddered under my weight, threatening to topple into the arena. "If you're not going to do your job, someone has to."

Rodric's eyes narrowed. "I've already found one of their old hideouts. It's just a matter of time until I find their current one." He had tried several methods to catch the Desert Boys, like setting traps around seemingly unguarded wells to tempt a raid in the middle of a deserted square. He'd also tortured the few suspected Desert Boys he'd caught. But despite being hung upside down above the tiger cages or put in boxes with hundreds of raw worms, the boys never spoke.

"You think your two guards are going to follow him into the desert?" I retorted.

"And you would? You're no Tamlin. You don't know what's beyond the city walls like I do."

I forced myself to meet his gaze. He stood a little more than a hand taller than me, and his body was thick with muscle. "The desert doesn't scare me. I am my father's daughter, and Tamlin's blood is in my veins just as it was in my ancestors'. He faced the desert and lived, and so will I."

Unlike anyone before him or since, Tamlin had survived traveling across the entire desert on foot, emerging from the sands to be crowned king when he saved the people from an approaching army. But even before his trek, the Achran people had believed the desert chose its rulers. Endless plagues of sandstorms, incessant droughts, and ceaseless scorpion invasions were signs of weak blood on the throne. Although my father

blamed the increasingly awful drought and run of sandstorms on the Desert Boys, claiming even the desert itself was trying to rid them from its dunes. And things wouldn't get better until they were stopped.

"What was your plan if you found their hideout?" he continued. "Were you going to take them all on at once? I've taught you well, but not even you could take on Cion."

I rolled my eyes. "Cion doesn't exist." As far as I'd heard, no one had ever laid eyes on the Desert Boys' leader. He was more likely a myth made up to scare us. No one could be as good with a blade as the rumors made him out to be.

People said he could swing his sword through the gap in a snake's forked tongue before the snake could retract it. That tale was outdone only by the rumor that if you threw a grain of sand into the air, he could split it in half with his blade. But the people who spread such things were likely the same ones who said the sand parted for him, and that's why he could sneak up on the wells so quietly. Or that the dunes settled around him like a cloak, making him impossible to see. Some even claimed he was made of sand, and that's why the guards couldn't catch him. He would just melt away into nothing when they tried.

I didn't believe any of it.

But Rodric did. Especially the claims about his skill with a sword, which is probably why he sliced out the tongue of anyone he found talking about Cion's abilities.

That was why I didn't dare mention I'd tried to do the things Cion was rumored to be capable of. I'd snuck down to the kitchens and stolen snakes from the baskets before they were killed for feasts. I'd set them free in my room and tried for days on end to slip my blade between their outstretched tongues. All I

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succeeded in doing was scraping my floor and having to dodge endless numbers of bites. I'd even tried splitting a grain of sand in half. I could smack it and knock it away. But only one grain of sand ever hit the floor. It wasn't possible. None of it was.

Rodric's face darkened. "He exists." His hands clenched the bars of the railing, strangling them as he leaned his weight forward.

"If he's as good as everyone says, what will you do if you're the one to find him?"

"I'm the best swordsman this desert has ever seen. No one could beat me, not even you."

I scoffed, pretending to brush off the comment, but this time his words bit deeper into my skin than any cut he'd given me while practicing. He was right. I couldn't beat him. And I'd tried.

During our first lesson, he'd sliced three hairline slashes into each side of my neck. He'd said if he'd made them any deeper, I would have been like a fish on land, unable to breathe. Rodric called it a new technique, but he hadn't bothered to teach it to me.

In order for the desert to accept me as its future queen, there could be no one fiercer, stronger, or better than me in a fight. I'd pulled out my sword and rushed up behind him. Just as I was about to send my blade into his back, he turned, grabbed my arm, and flipped me over.

The next thing I knew, he'd pinned me to the ground and whipped out a knife, pressing the blade against my throat. "If you ever try that again," he said, his eyes wild, "I'll hang you from the tower of your father's palace." He eased off me and dropped the knife to the ground.

I'd lain there for a moment praying that sand hadn't found

its way into my new wounds and dealing with the stinging pain that swept through me every time I moved.

I wanted to pick my knife up to try again, but something in Rodric's eyes made it clear he'd follow through on his threat.

As these weren't normal training injuries, I'd started wearing a thick golden cuff around my neck after that to cover the scars. To keep my father from seeing, from knowing I'd failed to be the best. And it worked. My father saw me embracing my strength, not hiding my weakness, because he believed there was nothing stronger than metal in the desert.

But I hated how it choked me and slid like oil across my body when I sweat. It also fettered me to my father in a way that felt like I'd given up on my mother's beliefs entirely, that I'd lost another part of her.

The cuffs were typically worn by the rich nobles as a symbol of their wealth—a show that they didn't need that metal to bar their windows against sandstorms or to hold water buckets together. Some had ornate patterns scrawled across the metal with holes dotted across them like stars in the sky or depictions of flowers or thick, wavy grooves.

My father had given my mother many when she married him, but she'd never worn one because she said it weighed too heavily on her.

I'd always thought she meant its physical weight. It wasn't until years after she died that I realized she meant it was because it was a waste to wear gold merely as a decoration when it could've been given to someone who needed it.

It was a stark reminder she hadn't grown up in the palace. She'd been a poor but beautiful sand dancer when she caught my father's eye.

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She'd made me promise once that I wouldn't wear one, that I'd look for strength in myself instead. I'd kept that promise until Rodric had made me break it, had made me so weak that I needed one.

My hatred for him burned brighter than the noonday sun.

As much as I wanted him dead, though, I needed him alive. He was the only one who'd ever been able to find a Desert Boys hideout. It'd been old and empty, but it was more progress than the old captain of the guard had managed.

And if Cion really did exist, I needed Rodric to help me fight. As well as to help me train for my final two bouts against suitors in the arena so I could secure my place as our next queen. Though once I became queen and the Desert Boys were destroyed, I'd send Rodric away. My father had been the first to teach me that you want strength to surround you, and Rodric was strong. But something about the way he'd shown up and killed the old captain of the guard made me uneasy.

He'd emerged too much like Tamlin from the desert, and I'd never gotten a word from him about where he came from or how he came to be so skilled. I was only grateful he wasn't nobility so I'd never have to face him in the arena. Because I was going to be the one to rule these people like Tamlin had done. Not him.

"Why don't we go after Cion together?" I asked.

"Because Cion is like a yellow-spotted sand snake. You'll never see him coming. The only way to get him out of his hole is to set a trap. I've got my two best trackers after the boy. Once they've followed him to the hideout, we plan our next move." He shook his head. "Besides, you should be focusing on your fight tomorrow." He crossed his bulging arms and stared down at me.

I looked to the door the Desert Boy had gone through and

groaned, knowing my chance to slip away had evaporated faster than spilled water. But there would be others. They couldn't hide forever.

"Come on." Rodric pulled out his sword and leapt over the railing into the arena. He motioned for me to do the same. "It's my job to make sure you don't lose."

Sighing, I unsheathed my sword and leapt down into the sand. He was right. Tomorrow I'd be fighting for more than my life. I'd be fighting for my freedom.

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