

NEOEXODUS

LEGENDARY TALES



The Fastest Blade

BY ERIK SCOTT DE BIE



The Fastest Blade

by Erik Scott de Bie



A Louis Porter Jr. Design Inc eBook

NEOEXODUS LEGENDARY TALES: The Fastest Blade

Copyright © 2017 by Louis Porter Jr. Design Inc.

Louis Porter Jr. Design Inc
5580 SW 97th Terrace
Cooper City, FL 33328
www.lpjdesign.com

Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover Illustration Copyright © 2017 Louis Porter Jr. Design Inc

Cover Design, Book Design, and Production by Louis Porter Jr.

Editing by Joshua Yearsley

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



PART ONE

The day started out much as any other for Orsia Wentworth. She woke from a night of heavy drinking, her head swimming but her purse only a bit lighter for the experience, draped in the arms and discarded clothes of strangers. Personally, Orsia found herself in the arms of a very lovely, pale-faced, red-headed woman who might be Armani. She didn't remember a thing about this woman but rather enjoyed how warm she felt.

Vaguely, Orsia recalled coming into the bar, pulling along her friend and confidante Dell, but from there it became even fuzzier. One man at the bar had questioned her right to carry such a fancy sword, and she distinctly remembered handing him his boots after she knocked him flat out of them. The night only went better from there. As time passed, her natural charm came into play and her fellow carousers tended to buy the drinks.

Orsia remembered harrowing tales of her exploits, some of which were even true. At one point, she'd climbed up on a card table to demonstrate a few of her flashier moves, though she didn't remember precisely when that had turned into general dancing. And in the end, even a typical night with Orsia in the bar reached a level of debauchery and merry-making to rival yearly festivals.

The chaotic atmosphere appealed to her rebellious nature. For one, it scandalized her prim and proper parents, who approved of her drinking and dancing even less than her swordplay. It hardly mattered: Lord and Lady Wentworth generally treated their second daughter with disappointed neglect when they noticed her at all. There was a reason she

didn't use the Wentworth name when she went out at night, and she'd seen her family only a few times over the last year.

But even above that admittedly delicious subversion, mingling among the commoner folk was itself a challenge to the Empire's rigid social structure, and Orsia liked that. The idea that hard workers with dirt on their elbows could share cups with merchants or even nobles (albeit keeping their higher station a secret) made Orsia tingle all over. In her eyes, people were people, equally worthy of respect.

Eventually, after the drinking and romancing of the evening was done, everyone slept deep to await the morning and its dull return to reality and responsibility. Work would have to be done, food put on the table, and families cared for. Unless this day brought something different.

Which is exactly what came to pass that morning.

Orsia stirred when the door burst open, and a crimson-skinned prymidian in colorful garb strode through, stroking his braided silver beard. His flamboyant attire and bold body language marked him clearly for a bard, even though he had no musical instrument that she could see. With a superior eye, he surveyed the room full of groggy patrons. Their general state of haphazard disarray seemed to worry him not one whit. If anything, their lack of attention seemed to be what irked him.

"Hear me, all!" he proclaimed, so loudly that the words drew every bleary eye in the room. He did not shout, but his rumbling voice filled the chamber like magic. "I am Chenoa Gryn, speaker of truths and legends. My employer—the Great Khavren, He of the Lightning Blade—has declared a tournament of single combat to begin at highsun today, the reward for which shall be the honor of crossing his steel."

"Uh?" The sound came from a big p'tan squatting in the corner like a lion. "Some honor to duel a single human."

"I wasn't finished." Gryn frowned in annoyance. "The one who can defeat my employer in single combat shall be rewarded with a sack of gold equal to his or her own weight." As the crowd started to murmur in wonder at the generous prize, the prymidian stretched his shoulders as though doffing a burden. "These are the terms, and this my duty done. Fortune favor you all."

He turned and was gone.

Orsia sat there blinking for a second. Her mind worked slowly through the murk of too much alcohol, processing the bard's words. A smile spread across her face. "Dellthora," she said. "Dell?"

Leaving her companion of the evening with some reluctance, Orsia staggered out of the booth in search of her friend. True to form, Dellthora Norfolk was already up, scrabbling on a parchment at the bar, and looking none the worse for wear after the events of the

previous night. Odds were, she'd contented herself with just a single glass of watered wine, the better to watch out for her less responsible friend Orsia.

"Did you hear?" Orsia asked, hardly able to contain herself. "Khavren? My weight in gold?"

Dell nodded without looking up. "We have work to do."

#

A warm drink on a clear winter morning in Nyssa was one of Orsia's favorite experiences. The wind flowed from the west into the capital of the Caneus Empire, center of the old kingdom of Nas, bringing with it just enough temperate air to offset the worst of the hinterlands' chill. It felt brisk, but not the sort of bone-splintering cold Orsia remembered well from entirely too many travels away from civilization. Her heart was here, in this city, surrounded by thousands of people from all manner of lands and paths, walking the cobbled streets under the watchful eye of looming brick towers. A flock of snowbirds drifted past overhead, blending in with the wispy clouds. The colors and fashions—the hundreds of languages and multitude of faces—it all made her feel at home.

And today, Orsia meant to make her mark upon the city, just as she and Dell had dreamed of.

"You've faced Dadath's sword before, so he shouldn't be much trouble—if he even gets to you," Dell was saying, taking notes on one of her many scrolls of parchment. Today it was a list of potential challengers. "I saw a couple caviares practicing with crowsbeaks in the alley over there. Strange choice of weapon, but potentially dangerous. Then there's this big sellsword in the city I think you should watch out for. I'm not sure of his name, but he's huge and he's got tattoos over half his face..."

While her dearest friend rambled on about strategies and technique, Orsia sat in a café off the Rhone Plaza and sipped mulled wine, gazing up at the towering Gregorian Palace of the empress. Cassandra Eland had come to power only recently after the regicide of her eldest sister Mercy at the hands of their brother Bial—himself second in line for the throne. There were whispers, of course, that Bial was innocent, but his flight to the Reis Confederacy seemed quite telling. Cassandra had wasted no time crowning herself empress, with her meek younger sister as imperial executor, so it remained to be seen how effective they would be in ruling the empire. Shame about all the deaths, but at least in Cassandra, fate had bequeathed Nas a ruler worthy of respect and adoration.

"And then there's Tortor, that cynean with the big hammer and...Orsia?" Dell asked. "Ors? Are you even listening?"

Orsia had seen the empress once, during her sumptuous coronation. Cassandra Eland was a powerfully built woman, confident and beautiful despite—or perhaps because of—the vicious scar on her face. She'd obtained that mark in combat during the trials, Orsia had heard, and from the leonine grace of Cassandra's movements, she could believe the tale. Orsia knew a warrior when she saw one, and given the opportunity to cross blades with

the empress, she would leap at the chance. And perhaps, if Cassandra was impressed by her natural talent and good luck, she might ask Orsia to serve as her personal bodyguard. *Very* personal.

So she was half in love with Empress Cassandra. Who in Nas wasn't?

"Ors!"

Orsia swept her hand through empty air, realizing too late that Dell had taken her wine. Her mind had wandered again, down the exciting paths of adventure and romance and derring-do.

Somewhat awkwardly, Orsia turned the gesture into a stretch for her arm, then brought her elbow back down onto the table and leaned her chin on her hand. "Yes, my darling Dell?"

Dellthora Norfolk looked unimpressed. Orsia's flirtations always rolled off Dell. It was probably why they had remained friends for so long.

"I don't like how non-serious you're being about this," she said. "You could have spent the morning training, or at least paying attention to who else might be there. Instead—" She gestured at Orsia's cup of wine: her fourth. "You've spent the morning drinking."

"I have to get past my hangover somehow," Orsia said. When Dell didn't laugh, she laughed for the both of them. "Never fear. We both know how good I am with a blade. If I face anyone who challenges me, I'll just fight harder. Always have, always will."

Dell looked the opposite of mollified. "I just worry about you, that's all."

"Well don't. If anything, *that* will make me nervous." She eyed her friend sidelong. "Why not think instead about your hopeless adoration of Khavren the Quick, he of the *Lightning Blade*."

That shut Dell up in a hurry and made her cheeks flush bright red. "That's—that's not true."

"Sure it isn't." Orsia saw activity in Rhone Plaza, and she knew the time had come. "Come. Let's see if we can't catch a glimpse of the lad of your fantasies, eh?"

Orsia took Dell's hand and pulled her friend along almost too fast for her to collect her notes.

#

Hiring a bard to drum up interest seemed to have worked, for Orsia counted at least a hundred people in Rhone Plaza. Most were humans of one shade or another: gruff soldier types in hodge-podge armor, steely-eyed scoundrels bristling with blades, and a few foreign barbarians in heavy furs with cumbersome weapons. She noted a trio of rat-faced caviars, keeping mostly to themselves in a small cluster that bristled with weaponry—

notably at least two crowsbeaks. Most considered the hafted hook a peasant weapon, but these looked particularly well made. She'd have to be careful around them.

Khavren himself was nowhere to be seen—or, at least, Orsia didn't see anyone she would have labeled as the famous swashbuckler. She'd never met him, after all. Chenoa Gryn was present, though, his prymidian skin like burnished rosewood gleaming in the thin light that pierced the clouds. Away from the deserts of his homeland, he looked entirely too cold and a little bored.

"Step forward to accept the challenge," Gryn was saying, and a steady stream of warriors had taken him up on the offer. "We have room for sixteen challengers, and—yes, the fourteenth now."

"Hurry!" Orsia urged Dell on, but her friend's bulky winter dress hobbled her. Finally, Orsia let go of Dell's hand and scurried forward herself, pushing unceremoniously to the front of the crowd.

"Fifteenth is Tane the Mighty," Gryn said. "And sixteenth—"

"Orsia Wentworth!" Orsia shouted even as the cavians she had glimpsed said "Thorn the Bold!"

The three cavians glared at her, muzzles wrinkling in angry challenge, while she put her hand to the hilt of her rapier. Not to mention everyone in Rhone Plaza seemed to be staring at her. Awkward.

The bard paused, uncertain. "Do you...have the entry fee?"

"The fee." Orsia hesitated, patting her belt pouch, which felt a little light. "Of course." She didn't remember anything about an entrance fee. The cavians were clustered in a little group, piling coins and bits of jewelry into a communal pile, which they had been doing when Orsia came rushing up. They probably almost had it. One of them was still giving her the old weasel-eye.

"Wait, wait!" Dell came running up, holding a thick purse. "Here. I have it here."

Orsia stared down at all the coin her friend was shoving at the bard.

"It was what I could scrape together." Dell looked to Orsia and frowned. "What did you imagine I was doing all morning?" she asked under her breath.

"I thought you were sitting with me at the café."

Dell groaned. "Clueless."

Orsia made to reply, then realized that there had indeed been some time since her friend had taken leave from the table. Orsia had thought it just a few moments. Finally, she simply nodded.

Gryn, oblivious to their converse, looked between the cavians and them, then looked up to address the assembled crowd. “There can be only sixteen entrants, but we have a special pre-tournament fight to offer!” he said, voice loud and stirring. “Whichever of you wins shall be entered.”

Orsia barely had time to start forming a reply before the cavians were on her, all three attacking in a sudden wave. Only instinct and honed reflex brought her sword out in time, poised to catch a charging cavian through the thigh to discourage their mad rush. They circled her, hissing and snarling.

“Three wounds,” Gryn said. “That is victory.”

“So they have to score three, but I have to score nine,” Orsia said. “No problem.”

“Ors—” Dell staggered back, murmuring quietly. She’d always been the talker, Orsia the fighter.

Her rapier glittering in the wintry light, Orsia stepped back into an open dueling stance and smiled at the cavians. “Come on then,” she said, shaking her blade. “I haven’t got all day.”

One of the creatures staggered back, unnerved by her sheer indifference to the threat they offered, but the other two went unfazed, including the one she’d stuck with her rapier in that first moment. They came at her as a loosely coordinated team, but she saw the holes in their tactics immediately. She dodged left to put the first one between herself and the second. The cavian jabbed wildly with his spear through the air where she had stood, and she poked him once, twice, thrice in quick succession with her rapier. One down before he’d even had a chance.

The second cavian—this one female—hissed as she pounced on Orsia, and it thrust at her with a crow’sbeak. Orsia managed to nick the cavian’s hand with the tip of her rapier—one of three wounds—but realized that in her eagerness she’d made a mistake. The cavian locked the flanged head of the curious weapon around the strong base of her rapier and ripped the sword out of her hand, sending it to clatter on the cobblestones. Orsia leaped back, but the cavian swept up the crow’sbeak and smacked her hard on the chin. Orsia staggered, blood welling at the edge of her jaw. One wound to her.

The crow’sbeak came at her face, and Orsia narrowly ducked aside, feeling her hair rustle in its wake. She stepped in close to the cavian, drawing a long knife from her belt as she went. She cut upward along her arm, wrenching a yelp of pain from the creature. Then, pressing her boot into its hip, she pushed the cavian away while kicking off into a backflip—an entirely unnecessary but deeply satisfying flourish that drew several gasps and even some scattered applause.

Orsia landed on her feet with a snarling cavian bearing down on her. She flipped the knife in her hands and hurled it right into the charging cavian, smacking her hard in the face with the pommel. The cavian pulled up short, startled and a little confused. Then blood started to run from its nose, and it staggered back a step.

“Three hits for the bravo,” Gryn said, then turned his gaze on the last cavian. “Sir?”

Orsia looked to her last attacker, who had hung back, white-knuckled fingers working on the haft of his crowsbeak. She held his eyes as she wedged a toe under her fallen rapier and flicked it up into her hand. She smiled.

The cavian threw down the crowsbeak and put up his hands.

Silence gripped Rhone Plaza for a moment, then it burst into applause and cheers. Those who had come to watch some excellent fighting were highly entertained, and those who had entered the tournament looked at Orsia with wary respect. Even Chenoa Gryn’s blank face split into a pleased grin.

“Orsia Wentworth,” the bard said. “Number sixteen.”

She smiled. “Was there ever a doubt?”



PART TWO

The tournament was fantastic. Orsia could not remember having a finer time in years.

Duels dominated the morning and evening each day, fought at the heart of Rhone Plaza or elsewhere in Nyssa. Watching fights was one of Orsia's favorite activities, second only to participating.

The first two duelists to enter the tournament squared off that first day as the sun began to dip, making the city sparkle slightly in the cold twilight. The clear favorite to win this fight was the red-haired woman with the massive axe over the slinky black female p'tan facing her. However much Orsia had begged Dell, no silver went on the p'tan.

"I'm telling you," Orsia had said. "I have a good feeling about that one."

"Maybe." Dell had given her a cool look. "If we hadn't invested all of our savings on your entry."

"Point," Orsia had to concede.

For the first half of the fight, it looked like Orsia had been right. In her experience, agility and dexterity always defeated brute strength, and that fact favored the p'tan. The black-furred woman danced around the axe-wielder, landing two stinging blows with her dusky-bladed rapier. Her luck changed, however, when the massive woman brought her axe down on the p'tan's rapier and shattered the blade with a shriek of steel. Before the

p'tan could recover, the woman pounded her into the cobbles with first the butt of her axe, then her gauntleted fists. It took two muscular men to pull her off.

Chenoa Gryn raised the axe-wielder's hand high. "This duel goes to Edanir of the Nasian Hills!"

Only the applause snapped her from her rage. Her smeared face made Orsia tremble a bit.

Dell squeezed Orsia's hand. "Can't say you told me so," she said coolly.

"Ugh." Orsia rolled her eyes.

The men went to help the p'tan to her feet, but she hissed at them and spat equal parts blood and drool. She limped off under her own power. That, Orsia could well admire.

She noticed a young man standing beside her, though she couldn't say what about him had drawn her attention. He wore plain brown clothes, had an average height and build with rich burgundy-brown skin, and looked more or less like everyone else. Perhaps he was some sort of squire or servant of one of the fighters? And yet, something made him seem important. He saw her looking at him and smiled faintly, as though pleased by the attention.

The bard announced the next fight to begin in a few hours, distracting Orsia.

"Come on," Dell said, pulling Orsia's arm. "We need to strategize."

"Right."

When she looked back, the man was gone.

#

The following morning, Orsia took her place for her first official duel of the tournament.

Over the previous night, laborers had laid three massive logs in Rhone Plaza. Standing above it all on a raised platform, Gryn explained the rules of this particular duel. "One hit for falling and one for a touch," the bard said. "If you are hit thrice, you have lost!"

Orsia nodded. The battle would test their balance and also limit their mobility, forcing them to fight in a straight line rather than circle around one another. Fortunately, she excelled in such circumstances.

"Orsia the Quick!" Gryn said. "Does she deserve her place in this tournament? We shall see!"

Ha. Orsia smiled brilliantly. For that little challenge, she'd give them quite the show.

Orsia stepped up on a log with an easy, lithe grace and tested her footing. The cold rain of the previous night had left the log slick, making it especially treacherous, but no matter. She slid one foot off the log as though to fall, making the audience gasp and fix its

attention only on her. Then she caught herself on her hands, turned a cartwheel, and came up with her arms flung wide. They cheered and clapped at her performance.

Her opponent appeared out of the ranks of the watchers. He was an older fellow—probably a little past his fortieth winter—and had a big, imperious nose that she thought looked a bit familiar, though she couldn't place it. Orsia knew dueling for a game of the young, so seeing an older bravo always made her a little wary where others might jest and mock. A fighter needed talent to last so long, and experience wasn't a thing to sneer at.

The man climbed up on the log, looking a little perturbed at the annoyance, and drew a gleaming rapier that appeared almost new. Perhaps he'd recently commissioned it?

"Thadeon of Nyssa," Gryn said. "Fight well!"

Orsia needn't have worried, though. The fight was over almost before it began.

Thadeon came at her, slipping a little on the log, and they traded a few experimental cuts, each easily batted aside. He struck slowly and with strength rather than skill, and that would be his undoing. Before the fourth exchange, Orsia saw an opening in his defense. She parried at his pace, then suddenly riposted much faster and very hard. The thrust hit him in the chest, deflecting off his leather harness so it didn't puncture his flesh, but the force of it knocked him sprawling into the snow. There he sat, touching his head hesitantly.

"A resounding hit!" the bard said. "A palpable thrust! Two hits for Orsia."

Orsia waited on the log while Thadeon climbed back up, sword at the ready. He stared at her, and she could see anxiety creeping up inside him and turning into fear. Intimidation could be as sharp as any blade, her old fencing master had taught her.

The third hit was easily achieved. Orsia simply stepped toward Thadeon, menacingly and suddenly, and his eyes shot wide. He lost his balance and tumbled off the log into defeat.

Disappointing, but she'd made it through the first round.

Orsia smiled wanly. One battle at a time.

#

Two duels transpired each day, and Orsia watched them all—as much as she could, anyway. Some of the fighting styles were flashy and impressive, with weapons and techniques even Orsia had never seen. She'd assessed most of them for weaknesses, but it was hard to predict which combatant would win on any given day. She found the tournament exciting rather than threatening.

Still no sign of the mysterious Khavren. Orsia expected him to show himself at any moment, but every duel began without a trace of their mysterious sponsor. With each day the anticipation grew, nervous tension building for some sort of promised fulfillment. This added to the savor.

The evening of the fourth day brought a dull if aesthetically pleasing match-up between two good-looking human men, completely different in skin-tone, hair style, and carriage though all but interchangeable in weaponry and armor. Both favored the rapier and wore a thick suit of leather with stitched-in rings. Orsia wrinkled her nose. The finest brigandine wouldn't do much against a good rapier thrust, and their armament wasn't much to remark upon. Even their fighting styles were similar: both entirely too eager and clumsy, they put too much weight behind each swing and launched cuts with movements thrice as exaggerated as they needed to be.

Handsome, those lads, but she could have easily bested either in a duel. At least one would be eliminated early so she wouldn't have to waste her time. Although...

"What odds will you give me that I can bed the winner?" Orsia asked Dell.

Her friend looked scandalized. "*Orsia Wentworth.*"

"What, you think I can't do it?"

"On the contrary." Dell gave her a long-suffering look. "With your luck, you'd probably get both of them at once if you wanted."

Orsia grinned. "So, two to one?"

Dell returned a long suffering scowl. "Fine. Two to one." Dell held up one of their last remaining silver coins. "And what will you bet with, Lady Empty-Pockets?"

"As if I'll need it."

Orsia saw again the young man who blended in with the crowd, across the arena from where they watched. What was it about him that drew her attention?

Orsia ended up rooting for the Dominion native over the local boy, because she liked his smile and the obvious arrogance of leaving his harness unlaced to reveal a swath of his burnished brown chest. She also liked the chest itself, of course. Again she'd guessed wrong, however, and the man met with defeat in short order, proving even less adept at dueling than his foe. At least they ended up laughing and patting each other on the back about it afterward like the old friends they obviously were.

"I'm going to ask that man for a drink," Orsia said after the bard announced the winner. "Maybe his fellow, too. Join me?" When Dell only smiled ruefully, Orsia smirked at her. "Come now, you gain nothing by being a sore loser. I'll wager they take pity on my equally pretty but less wealthy friend."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Dell nodded toward the podium.

The Nasian swordsman seemed to be celebrating his victory by kissing his Dominion opponent quite hard and reaching inside the man's open brigandine to caress his muscular chest.

"Damn," Orsia said. "I should have known."

“Probably.” Dell put out her hand. “I’ll take my winnings, then.”

Orsia scowled. “I’ll just have to owe you.”

“Of course you will.”

#

As the sun rose on the sixth day, Orsia shifted her weight from foot to foot and did a number of quick steps, stretching out her legs for her second duel of the tournament.

By the time the sixteen challengers had become eight, the hundred or so onlookers who had come to see the first fights of the tournament had about doubled in number, including a few folk in wealthy attire and their guards. Word of the tournament was spreading, and Orsia reveled in all the attention. She’d recovered and rested well after her fight with the cavians, and her first duel had been so short she’d barely even noticed herself fighting.

Neither spat had warranted much attention, but it set a certain tone for her fights: quick, precise, and flamboyant. And Orsia Wentworth, natural showman that she was, wasn’t about to disappoint her adoring audience with less than her best. She hoped that at least this new opponent—appearing now out of the ring of watchers—would last long enough to let her demonstrate her flair.

The two squared off in a wide circle cordoned off in the center of Rhone Plaza, giving them enough room to move around. No strange terrain rules this time—not after so many had simply fallen off the logs, shortening their matches and thus depriving the masses of their entertainment.

The warrior they’d picked to oppose her had such long, raven-black hair that she’d taken him for a woman at first. Not that she was one to talk, with her unruly mop of auburn hair and tomboy features. No one would ever accuse her of being a delicate feminine flower, and thank the gods for that. This young man had the opposite blessing: a body so slim and face so perfect as to be beautiful rather than handsome. His vivid lavender eyes pierced the winter air, and his full lips looked very kissable. A younger Orsia would have found herself practically incapacitated with giggling in the presence of such a lovely lad, and in truth seeing him still gave her pause. But after spending time in the beds of more than a few men and women, from the common to the exceptional of visage and figure, Orsia had come to realize such outward beauty for the mask it was. Outward perfection could hide ugliness or amplify the truth within, and she had no way to tell this lad’s truth.

Until she bested and bedded him, of course.

Chenoa Gryn took his usual place on the platform to announce the fight. “This morn,” the prymidian said, “the scrapper Orsia Wentworth of Nyssa against the duelist Daevos, also of Nyssa!”

“Local lad, eh?” Orsia smirked at her opponent. “Your place or mine after I put you in the dust?”

The beautiful boy drew his rapier, keeping his eyes low and not meeting her gaze.

“What’s the matter, gorgeous?” Orsia asked, flirting a bit. “Nervous?”

“Begin!” the bard said.

Daevos came at her slowly—hesitantly—and that proved his undoing. Orsia didn’t even draw her sword until he neared the reach of her lunge. Not his fault: her range far exceeded what one might expect from just looking at her. She shot out a step, dropped low, and whipped her rapier out like a striking snake, catching the lad’s arm as he thrust awkwardly toward her. Daevos jerked back, startled by the sudden movement and pain, and stared in disbelief at the blood welling on his wrist.

Orsia glanced at the crowd, scanning for something—*someone*. She caught a glimpse of bright eyes and thin lips that curved into an approving smile. Sure enough, the plain squire was watching.

“First point to Orsia,” Gryn said, and a chorus of cheers arose.

“Sorry about that.” Orsia waved her sword wide, flicking the bit of blood free. She smiled at Daevos. “This thing’s just so sharp, you know.”

The mockery—even Orsia had to admit it wasn’t flirtation any more—seemed to snap Daevos from his startled stupor, and he rushed at her. Stupid.

Orsia dropped low and thrust as he approached. In a fight to the death, she’d have spitted him clean through the belly with that move, but Orsia pulled aside at the last instant so her blade instead nicked Daevos’s ribs. The bard declared a second hit, and she rolled to her feet.

Or, at least, she would have had Daevos not stumbled into her without anything approaching grace. Orsia narrowly jerked her head aside so his blade didn’t cut her cheek open, but instead it stabbed into her shoulder. Pain lashed her, and her arm broke out into numb tingles. She tried to squirm away, but Daevos lost his grip on the blade in favor of seizing her by the shoulders. They fell to the grimy cobbles together, splashing filthy slush all over themselves. Daevos tried to climb on top of her, but Orsia squirmed free.

“This,” she said as she struggled, elbowing him in his pretty face, “is my best—*coat!*” She smashed her fist into the side of his head, knocking him sprawling to the ground.

Her sword lost in the struggle, Orsia pulled out her long knife and put it to Daevos’s throat. In her anger, she’d almost forgotten the rules of this duel. Chenoa Gryn looked at her, smiling a bit awkwardly. “Four hits for Lady Wentworth,” the bard said. “Er. You’ve won.”

Orsia sheathed her blade, glaring down at Daevos. “By the Hells, man,” she said. “Did you never learn to fight?”

“Not—not a fighter,” he said, his voice as touchable and kissable as his lips. “I... I serve her Ladyship, in the house of Wentworth.”

“I think I’d remember if I had a manservant,” Orsia said. “Wait. You mean—” Her eyes narrowed. “My *mother*.”

He nodded. “She’s—she’s concerned for you, my lady,” he said. “She paid me to enter and—”

“You tell my mother—” Orsia said, accentuating the point by smashing the pommel of her rapier into Daevos’s stomach, making him crumple. “—that I don’t need her coin to win my battles for me.”

“A fifth hit!” the bard said. “Again, victory to Orsia Wentworth!”

She peeled herself off Daevos, who lay gasping on the cobblestones, fallen sword half a pace from his hand. She couldn’t feel anything but disrespected and hurt when she looked down at him.

Pity, really. He was so beautiful.



PART THREE

Orsia tried hard to forget about her mother's interference and lose herself in the tournament. She had to, as it became more and more difficult each duel.

It was midday on the seventh day, and a crowd of over a thousand crushed into Rhone Plaza to watch the penultimate fights. The eight remaining combatants had become four, all of them arrayed in their own spaces with the devoted admirers they'd made over the last six days: the fiery-haired woman who'd beat her p'tan opponent nearly to death early in the tournament, a sasori in a black cloak who had dispatched all his opponents with efficiency, a massive dark-skinned warrior with a scarlet tattoo covering half his face and body, and herself. Of the three, she would have preferred to fight the redhead, but fate seemed to have a different plan.

"Orsia the Quick against Swift Sephent," Chenoa Gryn said, indicating the sasori with one hand. Then he indicated the others. "And Magdah the Fierce against Tane the Marked!" He raised both hands. "The duels to be fought concurrently, and the winners to face each other this eve!"

Orsia winced. Two duels in one day. Assuming she won the first one, of course.

Now that only four fighters remained, the bard had seen fit to introduce even stranger terrain than before. Dell had wondered aloud if Khavren's laborers had the proper permits to build the arena, but the increasing imperial presence at the fights suggested they did. Rumor had it the empress herself would come watch the final match between the famous

Khavren and whoever won the tournament. Orsia had every intention of that being her, but she had to get through this day's duels first.

The barbarians squared off in a vast mud pit, while Orsia and her sasori opponent stood at either end of a small forest of posts of uneven height and width—some just large enough to stand on, some enough for two. A hit was bestowed for touching the ground. These duels were five-point affairs, rather than three. This would be a difficult fight, unless of course her mother had bought off this Sephent as well, fantastic as that seemed.

To say that Lady Shorchia Wentworth had never approved of Orsia's bravo lifestyle would be an understatement. Her mother had opposed Orsia's career of choice at every turn, paying off would-be tutors to refuse her swordsmanship training and chasing off "unsuitable" friends and suitors of lower station. She'd employed first servants, then independent adventurers to follow her daughter's every move, "rescue" her from taverns, and generally spy on Orsia's activities so that she might publicly shame her later. That she would stack the tournament with her own servants seemed very much in character.

Orsia really needed to leave this city. Perhaps with the gold this tournament offered...

"Ors?" Dell looked profoundly nervous as she buckled on Orsia's leather vambraces for her.

Orsia realized she hadn't been paying attention again—letting her mind wander.

The duelists took their places, and Orsia felt Sephent's measuring gaze upon her. The scrutiny of those pupil-less black eyes felt both recognizably martial in one respect and wholly alien in another. It sized her up and analyzed her. She'd never fought a scorpion-man before, and hadn't seen enough of the sasori's matches to know what to expect. He tended to take down his opponents before Orsia could find a good viewing angle. Dell had shared some observations and insights about Sephent, but Orsia couldn't remember many of them now. Something about sasori having poisonous blood to discourage predators. She'd just have to improvise, like she always did.

"My mother didn't bribe you too, by any chance?" she asked.

Sephent raised his hands and uttered a soft hissing sound. Pity.

"Begin!" Gryn said.

Orsia started to draw her blade, but a roar from the barbarians startled her. She flinched, narrowly dodging a spinning blade that the sasori had hurled at her. She felt its sharpness as it cut free an errant strand of her hair, but it drew no blood. The blade sailed off into the crowd, where someone yelped in dismay. Orsia glared back to see Sephent stalking toward her, balancing easily on the pillars as though they were built especially for his clawed feet.

"So that's how it is, eh?" Orsia drew her long knife with her off-hand. "I've a blade for y—"

She couldn't quite finish before Sephent leaped through the air for her. She hadn't seen him move, much less tense and spring, but here he came. He had no weapons, but with those claws for hands, he didn't need them.

Orsia raised her rapier to intercept, but he spun in midair, smashing it aside and kicking her once in the face and again in the chest, knocking her back among the pillars. Despite the screaming pain, she narrowly caught herself on a wide platform, rather than end up on her face in the mud. She lost the long knife, though, which clattered to the cobbles six feet below.

"Two hits already," the bard said, "and almost a third!"

Orsia gritted her teeth and kipped up, legs dragging her back to her feet. She found Sephent waiting patiently for her, legs crossed beneath him, on a far pillar. Apparently, he didn't want to win by striking her when she was down. She steadied herself and pointed the blade at him.

"Well, what stays you?" she asked.

The sasori hardly seemed to be looking at her but, rather, searching the crowd. He gave a slight nod, then turned toward her, hands raised. The crimson markings on his otherwise dark carapace gleamed. This would be no easy duel.

He had speed to match her reach, yes, but she had something he didn't: panache.

Sephent lunged, quick-stepping across the pillars toward her, but Orsia didn't meet his charge head-on. Instead, she waited until he came within two paces, then hurled herself at him in a wild, all-out rush. No one who had watched her previous matches would have expected such a desperate move, one that would almost certainly cost her a hit, but it seemed to surprise the sasori. He swiped at her too low, and she kicked off to vault over his claw, turning her mad charge into a flying run right over him. She jabbed him once in the shoulder as she went over, then again in the back as she dropped behind him to balance carefully on two small pillars.

The crowd gasped in astonishment, then erupted in cheers as she executed a sweeping bow.

With a furious hiss, Sephent whirled on her, but Orsia knew better than to remain close. Reach was her only advantage, and she knew how fast he could move. Besides, his welling blood smelled foul, and she didn't want to come too close. Leaping back to a raised pillar, she fended off his claws, not scoring a hit but not taking any hits either. They danced across the pillars, neither close enough for a winning combination. Then the sasori eased his assault for a breath and they ended up about two paces apart. Sephent raised his hands over his chest, pulling all his strength into his core.

This, Orsia thought, did not look good. She tensed to leap.

Sephent struck and she dodged, but she wasn't his target. Instead, the sasori lashed out at the pillar she was standing on, which shattered like kindling struck by a warhammer.

She slipped and would have fallen, but Sephent lashed out with one clawed foot and struck her in the stomach hard enough to launch her to the ground. Orsia hit hard, and her world swam in gray and black for a second. Something inside her felt loose, and when she wiped her lips, her hand came away bloody.

“Four hits!” the bard said. “Do you yield, Lady Wentworth?”

Orsia saw two faces in the shouting crowd—Dell, looking terrified for her, and that plain young man she’d seen the other day, who was staring at her intently. She gave him a mocking little smile and got to her feet. She raised her sword. “Oh no,” she said. “Not even a little bit.”

The crowd cheered as she climbed shakily back onto the platforms. Sephent even gave her a slight nod of something like respect. She didn’t believe it in the least—particularly when she saw the gleaming throwing blades in his hands. A wild plan occurred to her, and Orsia always executed those.

Before the bard finished saying “continue,” Sephent threw both blades, one after the other. Orsia ducked under one, which lodged itself in the pillar behind her, and managed to parry the other with her rapier, cutting it from the air down toward the muddy ground. The satori threw himself at her even as the blades flew, but Orsia was ready.

Sephent’s black eyes widened as she hurled the rapier right at him.

With his fast reflexes, the satori managed to knock the blade away, but not before it cut across his arm, loosing the noxious reek of his blood. Orsia was already moving, scooting under him to the next pillar, so that when he came down she was behind him. He whirled, claws up, and Orsia sprang back to hit him with a flying tackle, slamming him back against the taller pillar. The satori elbowed her off, and she fell to the mud, staring up at the gray sky, coughing at the fumes of the creature’s blood. The crowd was shouting—arguing—and the bard was crying out for calm.

“Ors!” Dell was there, healing magic at the ready. “Are you all right? Can you move?”

“We’ll see if I won,” Orsia said.

Dell looked confused. “That looked like a pretty definitive defeat,” she said.

“Care to—” Orsia coughed violently, spitting up blood. “Care to wager?”

She looked up at Sephent, who painfully pulled himself away from the pillar, where she had shoved him back into his own throwing blade. She smiled.

Chenoa Gryn must have seen it too. “Orsia landed her fourth and fifth blows before Sephent struck her down,” the bard said. “Thus, she is the victor!”

Applause and cries of congratulations erupted. The plain man in the audience gave Orsia a small smile, then faded from view.

Dell looked shocked. “Well, what do you know,” she said. “You were right for once.”

Orsia nodded, but her joy was short-lived. Across the way, two humans were hauling away the unconscious barbarian woman, her red hair trailing through the muddy slush. Massive bruises were developing on her face and chest. Her opponent, the giant called Tane, roared in triumph and challenge.

“One duel at a time,” Orsia said.

#

“Ow, ow, ow!”

Orsia winced as Dell helped lower her slowly into the copper tub. The water stung her raw skin.

Khavren’s people had healed some of her superficial wounds after that performance, but the sasori had left her surprisingly hurt in those four hits. Her ribs still creaked and her skin felt ready to flake off in the warmth and wet. Orsia was filthy, and Dell never let her stay filthy for long. They’d reserved the brass tub upstairs at Lady Ristor’s, and got right to work cleaning her up. Orsia shuddered as Dell poked and prodded her wounds to check on their progress, then delicately massaged her sore muscles and scrubbed her tender skin with a cool, damp cloth.

“This is what I was afraid would happen,” Dell said. “That you’d enter this tournament and get too far and then—” She pressed too hard on a bruise, and Orsia winced.

“Yes, yes, point made,” Orsia said. “I feel like an idiot, is that what you want me to say?”

“Don’t be a child.” Dell glowered at her. “I love you, Ors, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Aw, that’s—” Orsia drew in a breath and made a face.

“What?” Dell asked. “What’s wrong?”

“I—” Orsia waved her hand in front of her face. “I have to sneeze.”

Dell’s eyes widened. “Don’t,” she said. “Just—hold it in. Relax—”

Too late. The sneeze exploded out of Orsia’s mouth and nose, making her whole body cave inward in pain. It felt like her lungs filled with fire rather than air, and she sensed at least three distinct stabbing pains inside. Her body took a full twenty-count before the shuddering, grating pain finally subsided.

So scrunched up in concern was Dell’s face that veins stood out on her forehead. Orsia managed to give her friend a wan smile. “Just a bit of dust in the air,” she said. “Nothing to worry about.”

Dell opened her mouth to speak, but a knock at the door interrupted. “Who calls?” Dell asked, aggression tingeing the words. “I left instructions that Lady Wentworth not be disturbed.”

Orsia didn't like that name, and knew Dell only used it when the situation was serious.

The door creaked open to present a familiar face: the nondescript lad she had glimpsed multiple times during the tournament. He held himself with practiced grace and gazed directly at her in the bath, not at all bashful. The lad dressed plainly in a simple but well-made linen shirt and leather trousers. The quality of his attire only appeared to support her theory that he was more than he seemed.

"How dare you," Dell said. "Her Ladyship is bathing—"

"It's all right, Dell. Let him in." Orsia wrapped her arms around herself. "You're Khavren's squire, aren't you?"

That got his attention, and he smiled slightly. "What makes you think that?" he asked.

"The clothes, the interest, the way you move," Orsia said. "But that's not the point."

"No." He drew himself up tall. "Forgive the interruption, ladies. The Great Khavren would have you the Lady Wentworth know that her duel with Tane the barbarian is deferred until the morrow."

"Well," said Dell with a sour note. "The Lady Wentworth would have the Great Khavren know that she appreciates the stay of a single day. Surely her injuries will heal by then."

The young man quirked up a smile. "The Great Khavren would also know if Lady Wentworth requires aught of him, in recognition of her valor today."

Orsia gave a dry chuckle, which would have been a full laugh if her chest hadn't ached so badly. "Only that he call me Orsia. Lady Wentworth is my mother."

The young man stared at her for a long moment, his eyes cool and weighing. Then he nodded. "As you wish," he said. "*Orsia*."

He took his leave as smoothly as he had come, letting the silence linger. Dell looked from her to the door and back, as though trying to figure out what had just happened.

"What a presumptuous ass," Dell said. "A proper lady would have him strapped for that."

"Good thing I'm not a proper lady." Orsia eased back in the water, trying and failing to get comfortable.

"This was a stupid idea," Dell said. "I never, *never* should have let you talk us into it."

"I didn't talk anyone into anything," Orsia said. "You just assumed—correctly—that I'd want to fight. All I had to do was stagger up to that bar."

"And I shouldn't have done it," Dell said. "You almost died today. Healing magic or no, those blades are real. You miss a parry and someone hits you a little too hard—"

"There you go again, worrying too much," Orsia said. "Don't you want to meet the hero of your fantasies? The *Great Khavren*?"

“No,” Dell said. “I mean, yes, but it’s not worth *this*.” Her expression grew shrewd. “And don’t even pretend as though you’re doing this for me. I know you’re doing it for *you*. For the glory.”

“Damn right,” Orsia said. “I’m going to win tomorrow and come out unscathed. You’ll see.”

From the angle of her frown and her narrowed eyes, Dell looked unconvinced. “Just take care,” she said. “I don’t want this to happen again.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t,” Orsia said. “I know exactly what I’m doing.”

She hoped it reassured her friend.

She hoped it reassured herself.



PART FOUR

What promised to be the final day of the tournament began with cold, drizzling rain that turned the snow underfoot to uncooperative sludge. The poor weather proved little to no hindrance to the sea of folk assembled to watch the battle, however. Hundreds had become fully a thousand onlookers crowding and shoving and craning their necks to see the final two combatants.

The duel would have no odd terrain this time, but over the previous night Khavren's servants had constructed a set of stands for watchers around the circle. At least a hundred onlookers had packed into that space—more than could safely fit in the unwieldy structure—and perhaps a thousand more crowded around in all directions. There was even an assembly of folk in imperial costume gathered at one side of the dueling ring, conveying her majesty's approval of the proceedings. The audience's collective enthusiasm burned away the edges of the low-hanging haze, making vapor rise like wisps of cloud into the air.

"The final duel, to determine who will face Khavren the Lightning Blade," the prymidian bard announced. "First, the resourceful and deadly Orsia Wentworth!"

A roar greeted Orsia as she stepped out onto the dueling circle. If nothing else came of this tournament, at least she had attracted a few hundred more admirers. Just now, though, as she stretched her still-sore muscles, Orsia wished she had their carefree joy. Her watchers didn't have to square off against the tattooed barbarian.

“The Crusher Tane!” Chenoa Gryn raised up his hands, and the crowd exploded in cheers.

He pushed through the gathered throng, fully a head and shoulders taller than the tallest watcher and twice as broad. Intricate crimson tattoos marked the entire left side of his face and torso, along with his left arm, complementing his dark brown skin and hair in a way that was both beautiful and more than a little terrifying. One of the rare half-giants of Koryth, he stood near eight feet tall and had the powerful build and rippling musculature to match. Orsia’s whole body could have fit inside one of his massive thighs, and she felt her knees go a little weak just at the sight of him—and that was before she saw the huge war club he clutched in his right hand. Orsia had watched two of his fights, which he had dominated through brute force and intimidation.

“Focus,” she told herself. “Think.”

Tane wore little more than a loin cloth and two massive leather belts—Orsia suspected normal clothes wouldn’t fit him anyway. With such a big, unprotected target, landing hits would be easy enough, but if she took one in return... One strike from that massive club of his would make the damage she’d suffered from the sasori duel seem like a soothing massage. He was surprisingly nimble rather than clumsy in the way most big men were, and she’d seen him throw himself into an awe-inspiring rage that would have brought an army to its knees.

This... this was not going to be good.

Orsia thought back to what she and Dell had discussed, trying to remember their plan through the simmering fear that rose up in her chest. Her body wanted to scream, wet itself, and run, but she had to fight through it. She would antagonize him. Goad him. Provoke him into making mistakes. Use her superior speed. Keep away from that club... that *club*. She fancied she could see the head of that horrible thing already smeared with a bloody imprint in the shape of her face.

After many battles and several adventures, Orsia was no stranger to fear, of course. But just because she could recognize the fear didn’t mean she could control it. She forced a smile onto her face and even a laugh, though it sounded hollow. “Well,” she said. “If you win your weight in gold, you’ll have enough to buy Nyssa, no?”

Tane might not have perceived the effect his appearance had on her, but for that pitiful jest. He spread his lips wide in what was probably intended to be a smile but came off more as a grimace. The voice that emerged was deep and surprisingly canny. “Do not fight back,” Tane said. “This will hurt less.”

“Is that so?” Somehow, those words drove all the fear out of Orsia, replacing it with her more accustomed bravado. She held up her sword. “Try to dodge my thrusts—this will still stick you.”

This was no longer a chore but a fun challenge. This duel would be over quickly.

Chenoa Gryn—himself now nearly as much a crowd favorite as the fighters—climbed up on a pedestal erected for the event and spread his arms wide. “Now, honored warriors,” he said. “Begin!”

No sooner had the duel commenced than Orsia threw herself aside to avoid a downward sweep of Tane’s massive war club. The half-giant struck with more swiftness than she would have credited his bulky frame with. She’d barely even conceived a counter-thrust when he whipped his club around like it weighed nothing, clipping her shoulder as she tried desperately to dodge. That glancing blow knocked Orsia sprawling into the waiting onlookers, and she hung on them, dizzy and startled.

The barbarian could have squashed her on the spot, but Gryn held up a hand. “No striking the watchers,” he said. “Patience, oh great one.”

Tane smiled broadly and stepped back. “Come!” He bellowed at Orsia, clapping his chest.

Oh yes. She’d do that all right.

Orsia ran at him, swaying a bit to give the impression he’d rattled her senses. Her feint didn’t exaggerate far, but she still had the focus to pull it off. Tane brought his club around to strike where she was rushing, but Orsia dug in hard and threw herself around his opposite side. Her sword slashed across his unprotected leg, drawing a thin stream of blood that splattered the ground with burning crimson. The barbarian roared in pain and lashed out at her, but she was far too agile. Orsia rolled through the muck and came up behind Tane, just out of reach of his swinging club.

“Point for you, point for me.” Orsia flicked the blood from her blade. “Shall we do that again?”

Tane’s grin spread wider until it became manic. He threw his head back and laughed, a sound so loud it shook the square like thunder. He looked back down at her, his eyes burning. “I like you, frail one,” he said, hefting his club. “I will honor you in defeat.”

“*Your* defeat, you mean.”

Tane made a harrumphing sound and stretched. If he even noticed the wound to his leg, he gave no indication. Orsia backed away, putting ground between them, and the crowd flowed away from her as she moved. No one wanted to get too close to that monster, club or no club, if Tane got one hand around Orsia, that would be the end of her. And by his satisfied smirk, he knew it too.

The barbarian lurched into an attack with uncanny suddenness, but Orsia was ready for his speed this time. She leaped clear of the overhead swing, which cracked into the cobbles, and snuck in a quick stab that cut into the barbarian’s wrist. No sooner had she struck than she leaped and cart-wheeled away to avoid Tane’s furious counter. Tane’s club struck one of the support poles of the stands, sending onlookers scrambling for safety.

“Impressive,” Orsia said. “I mean, you hit an inanimate object, so that’s something at least.”

Tane grinned, the expression growing more unsettling as Orsia watched. “Too bad you are so small,” he said. “So fragile.”

“I’ll show you fragile,” Orsia said.

Not a great retort, but she was exhausted and feeling, well, fragile.

The battle dragged on. Tane’s mind might not have matched his bulk, but he knew how to fight. He fought with the club in a unique way that a smaller man couldn’t have duplicated: he dropped one hand off the club after a strike, then caught the haft again at a different angle mid-swing, altering its trajectory in a way that was not always predictable. He capitalized on his advantages—his reach and strength—and warded Orsia off through a combination of intimidation and sudden strikes that missed by inches. Orsia couldn’t get close without risking that whistling club knocking her into the next day. Twice it had clipped her rapier, making the weapon rattle in her hand hard enough to bruise. Orsia kept bounding back and to the side, hoping to outlast Tane. She’d hit him when his guard dropped.

The problem was that he just wasn’t tiring.

Fate seemed to have endowed the barbarian with a fearsome well of stamina to sustain his raw physical power. Orsia’s darting attacks and feints served only to anger him, not slow him. Against one of the swordsmen she’d faced thus far, that rage would have been to her advantage, but Tane only struck harder and moved faster as he whipped himself into a frenzy. By contrast, Orsia could feel her limbs burning as her lungs heaved to fill themselves.

The shouts of the watchers didn’t help. With the mad cacophony of cheers and whoops, Orsia had trouble focusing on the duel. She saw Dell in the screaming crowd, her face pale as death from cold and worry. She mouthed something, but Orsia couldn’t quite catch it. *Attack*, perhaps. That seemed to be the strategy of the day.

Orsia winced inwardly and gripped her rapier tight in an increasingly sore hand. She’d never been a particularly religious woman, but she prayed now for speed and good fortune.

This time, when she fainted and drew Tane’s counter, she burst forward, closing the distance with a series of quick steps. Surprise registered on the barbarian’s broad features, but he had no good defense for such a bold strike. Orsia’s feints and retreats had not been slow, but she’d pulled them both into a particular rhythm, and this attack moved at nearly twice the pace, catching Tane off guard. He thrust toward her with his free hand, and she seized the opportunity to put her rapier right through his palm. She could feel and hear bones rattling as they parted around her tempered steel. Such a grievous wound shocked the plaza into sudden silence.

“A second hit for Orsia Wentworth!” Gryn’s voice seemed thunderous in the lull.

Bounding free, Orsia let herself taste the elation, but only for a heartbeat. Then it drained away, replaced with unease. She saw Tane's body rippling as though with nervous tension, finally released. He slavered as he clutched his bleeding hand, reddish foam dripping from his jaws, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"Huh." Orsia looked at her sword in disbelief. No signs of any poison that might explain this.

In the silence, she could hear Dell's voice, and it certainly wasn't saying "attack."

"Hold back!" Dell shouted. "Hold back! Don't make him rage—"

Too late.

Tane looked up at her with yellow, bloodshot eyes devoid of anything like civilization. He had turned from man to beast, and it filled him with strength beyond anything Orsia had faced. He seemed to grow, his muscles flexing bigger and bigger, until he dwarfed her even as he knelt. Gone was the smile and the jovial manner from before. Now there was only hate.

"Damn." Orsia raised her sword.

The barbarian exploded up from the ground like a pouncing lion thrice her size, and it was only instinct that sent Orsia rolling out of the way. She slashed his arm open as she did, but the barbarian hardly seemed to notice. He lashed out with a massive backhand swing that tore a swath of cobblestones from the plaza. If Orsia had thought him strong before, now he exceeded mortal limits.

Tane lumbered toward her, screaming like a madman, and smashed his club down at her over and over until it cracked on the ground. Panting, Orsia kept dodging, thrusting into every opening. Once, twice, thrice she hit him, landing a total of seven hits, but he shrugged them off. Chenoa Gryn was shouting something and waving at the combatants, trying to call a stop to the fight, but Orsia was too busy to heed him. Now she fought not to win, but rather not to die.

With a roar, Tane punched at her, and Orsia leaped up onto his arm. It was a slippery perch, but she would only be there a moment. She stabbed at his face, but her rapier skipped off his thick skull and cut a furrow between the tight braids laid against his scalp. He threw her off to tumble across the cobblestones in a series of bruising hits.

People were coming out of the crowd to hold Tane back, but he shrugged them off like vermin. The air crackled as magic was loosed, but whatever effect it was meant to have, the barbarian pushed through it. Nearly exhausted, Orsia narrowly dodged Tane's club, which crashed into the ground so hard it jarred loose from his hands to strike him in the face, splitting his lip. He paused for a second, then growled in rising anger even as he drooled blood. He whirled on Orsia and lunged for her, bare hands reaching forth to tear her asunder. He didn't care that he had lost. Didn't even realize it.

Fighting just to stay on her feet, Orsia realized she would have to kill him to stop him.

Orsia let him come, then thrust forward in a deadly lunge, setting her body in a firm line. She felt her rapier stab into Tane's massive chest, skip between two ribs, and sink nearly to the hilt. But he kept coming, his fist winding up for a punch that caught her in the shoulder only because she twisted her face aside at the last instant. The world went gray and muddy, and she went down with Tane atop her.

His fists rose and fell, striking her and the ground with equal abandon, and his weight ground the pommel of her rapier into her belly as though it would stab through her into the cobblestones. She couldn't feel the hits anymore—just that burning pain of the sword grinding into her, pinning her in place. Orsia screamed in pain and terror.

Then a shadow appeared over them: a dark figure with a sword that crackled like a living thing made of the sun. The blade raked across Tane's back, and the barbarian roared in sudden pain. The pressure on Orsia eased, and she could breathe once more. Not that she could move. Her body felt like so much broken firewood.

Someone blocked the sun, and she saw it was Dell, her eyes wide. She was saying something, but Orsia couldn't hear. She smiled, blood bubbling up, and tried to speak.

Then darkness seized her.



PART FIVE

When next Orsia awoke, she found herself lying somewhere very, very comfortable. Candlelight glimmered in the otherwise dark room, and the smells of wine and roasting meat wafted to her nostrils. She'd woken in far worse circumstances than this, she had to admit.

She felt warm and whole, free of the consequences of her wounds—at least initially. Pain seeped in as her awareness deepened. The closer she rose to the bright surface of the world, the more her body ached, but it settled around the feel of sore muscles. All too well, she recognized the after-feel of healing magic. Someone had spared no expense.

Sounds broke the stillness, and it took a few repetitions for Orsia to identify the steady thunk of something into wood. It hit thrice then it paused for a few breaths, during which she heard the scrape of wood pulled from that same hunk of wood. When her eyes started to work, she realized the source of the sound: a man hurling knives into an inked portrait on the far wall. It took Orsia a second to recognize Empress Cassandra in the mangled image, which did not include the scar along her eye. Each knife, with pinpoint accuracy, struck her majesty's nose or one of her eyes. The portrait had many, many holes in it.

She could see only a little of the man throwing those knives—wiry, bare-chested, with dark skin and hair—mostly because of the glowing yellow light that diffused up from the table beside him. Next to her own rapier lay a shining sword whose steel danced with tiny currents of lightning. It was Khavren's famous lightning sword, Orsia realized. And that meant—

The man stepped out of the darkness after he'd thrown his third knife, and his face flashed through the candlelight as he went to reclaim his blades. She knew him immediately.

"You," Orsia said.

"Me." The plain man from the tournament paused and smiled at her. "And you're awake. Would you like some wine, Lady Wentworth?"

"Oh, don't call me that," she said. "And yes."

"Certainly." He poured two goblets and gave one to her. "I am of low birth myself, and I've always disliked looking up to 'proper' nobles. It's refreshing to speak with someone who doesn't feel bound by the rules."

"Though I suppose if I'm in your bed," Orsia said, "we might have already broken a few rules."

"Of course not. I would never take liberties with anyone without permission. And you are far more worthy of my respect than most." He raised his goblet to touch hers. "To you, Orsia."

Orsia let him toast her, then watched, dry-mouthed, as he sipped the wine. Only after watching him not collapse to the ground writhing in agony, she tasted the wine, which made her tongue dance and rejoice. She quaffed half the goblet in one go. The aches become a warm dizziness.

"And much as I like the compliments and talking about myself." She took another draught. "Don't you change the subject, which—" She finished the wine at a gulp. "Which was you."

Orsia held out the goblet for a refill, smiling sheepishly.

"Hmm. Me." He ran his tongue over his lips briefly, then went to wrench his knives out of the portrait. He slid them into three sheaths: one at his belt, one on his wrist, and one in a boot. Orsia wondered if he had any other hidden weapons. Likely. She reached over and refilled her own goblet.

"What would you know of me that you cannot already guess, Orsia?"

"Well, you've been Khavren this whole time," she said. "You cheeky little shit."

That made his smile widen. "Well yes," he said. "I can't be anyone other than myself. But I find anonymity is very useful, particularly when judging strengths and weaknesses of would-be allies." Khavren sat on the bed next to her, close but still keeping a respectful distance. "And I knew you were such a one. From the moment I saw you fight."

"And here I thought I was fighting to be your rival."

Orsia sat up on her elbows, and realized just then that she was nude under the blanket. Not that it stopped her sitting up, but she crossed her arms in a tiny concession to modesty. Dell would be proud. “My clothes?” she asked.

“A thousand apologies,” Khavren said. “Did you need them?”

Orsia considered. “Not just at the moment, but eventually,” she said. “All your rather effective seductions aside, I doubt you were putting on that tournament to find a new bedwarmer—though we’ll get to that. I mean, unless you prefer your lovers on the *gigantic* side.”

“Ah, Tane.” Khavren waved dismissively. “I’m glad you defeated him. Could you imagine trying to work with that brute on a... *sensitive* strike?”

“A sensitive strike, is it?” Orsia frowned. “You sure this isn’t an elaborate setup for lovemaking?”

“I suspect you can guess,” he said, languidly gesturing toward the holey portrait of the empress.

Orsia considered. He operated in the shadows, his face a mystery and his exploits the stuff of legend. He’d mentioned his discontent with the social strictures of Canean life, and clearly he had no great love for Empress Cassandra. Perhaps he was a revolutionary of some sort? Even—

She had it.

“You want to assassinate the empress,” Orsia said. “And you want me to help you.”

He nodded. “Quick with your wit as well as your sword,” he said. “Only the finest warrior in the land will do, and that is certainly you.”

Orsia’s stomach tightened. “Do I have a choice?”

She spoke softly to draw him in, and Khavren scooted closer on the bed. She could feel the heat of him, which awakened the same hunger in her. She traced her hands over him, not quite touching, and held his gaze. He hadn’t reached for her, and she rather hoped he would.

“Of course you have a choice.” He smiled. “Should you refuse, you are free to go—after she is dead, of course.” He leaned so close their noses brushed. “I can’t very well have you relating the thrust of my plan with the nearest Caneus guard, now can I?”

“That seems sensible.” Orsia bit her lip. Then she put one of his throwing daggers, palmed from his belt, up to his throat. “Particularly when you’re plotting treason.”

Khavren stared at her blankly. If her move had surprised him, he didn’t show it. “What happens now?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Orsia said as she relieved him of his wrist-sheathed dagger. “Any suggestions?”

Holding his hands wide, Khavren stood slowly and Orsia rose right along with him, pulling the blanket up against herself. “That looks terribly cumbersome,” he said, indicating the blanket. “I’d not expected modesty would be your particular crutch.”

“Hardly,” Orsia said. “But in the interest of fairness—”

“Fairness, is it?” Slowly, Khavren lowered his hands to the buttons of his leather jerkin and unfastened them. Orsia watched, transfixed, as he shed the garment and stood before her stripped to the waist. “More equitable?”

“Don’t stop there.” Orsia gestured down at Khavren’s body. “Off with the rest of it.”

His eyes never leaving hers, Khavren did as she directed, unbuttoning and sliding off his trousers. She had to pull the knife away so he could bend down, but she was pleased to do so. For all that Khavren looked like everybody else, his body was a perfectly honed mass of wiry muscle, and she rather liked the view. Perhaps this wouldn’t end in bloodshed after all.

Then he rose, knife in hand and pointed at her heart.

“Damn,” Orsia said. “Forgot about the one in your boot.”

“Yes you did.”

Orsia leaped backward and hurled her dagger at Khavren in one motion. He knocked it aside and hurried after her, right into the blanket she threw up in his path. He stormed through, but Orsia had already reclaimed her rapier and his from the table. She held them crossed over his throat now, daring him with her gaze to make a move. The lightning of his own sword licked at Khavren’s chin for a heartbeat. Then he flinched aside and knocked Orsia’s comparatively mundane rapier wide with a quick slash of the dagger. Suddenly the crackling sword was no longer in Orsia’s hand, but she didn’t wait around to see what had happened. She leaped back, fending off a seeking thrust she felt more than saw, and ended up perched on Khavren’s bed, the taut ropes under the blankets bending slightly under her weight.

The swordsman stood beside the bed, naked and smiling, lightning sword in his hand.

“How did you do that?” Orsia asked.

“Magic, obviously.”

He swished the blade through the air, then stepped up beside her on the bed, balancing without much trouble. Orsia could feel his weight through the ropes of the bed, unsettling her balance slightly.

They crossed swords once more, but in a jovial, friendly way. Their fight had gone from genuine violence to something like foreplay, and Orsia was more than happy to continue in

that vein. There was something about fighting this way, naked but for cold steel, that she found delightful. This man was trouble, but gods and goddesses, did she want him. And moreover, she could tell he wanted her.

“So treason, is it?” Orsia asked as they executed a quick series of passes and ripostes. None of the blades came close to hitting, of course. They were merely testing one another’s defenses.

“Is it treason if it is done to save a kingdom from a certain doom?” Khavren asked.

“Yes,” Orsia said. “Is that what you’re doing?”

Khavren let his impenetrably cool expression answer that.

“So you’re a true believer,” Orsia said. “That rules out assassination for coin. So it must be personal.” The angry flicker in his eyes confirmed her guess. “Why do you hate the empress so much?”

Now, for the first time, Khavren’s expression lost a bit of its ease. His eyes grew stormy and his mouth firmed up into a hard line. “Cassandra Eland is an insane tyrant, of a sort not seen since the Mad Emperor centuries ago,” he said. “You may not follow politics, but you live here. You’ve felt the tensions of the last few years. Cassandra has been at their heart. She rules through treason and regicide, having slain most of her family for the throne. That, one could understand—nobles do such things for power. But she did it out of jealousy.”

“Wait, wait,” Orsia said. “I thought the Reis Confederacy killed the old emperor. And Princess Mercy? That was her brother, Prince Bial, who fled the city—”

“All Cassandra.” Khavren shook his head. “She and Mercy both loved the khagan of the Dominion, but he chose the wrong sister,” he said. “In the hopes that he would love her if she were empress, Cassandra arranged for her parents’ deaths, then poisoned Mercy. Malik did not return her affections, though, and even now she gathers forces to launch an unwinnable war out of spite. Thousands of our fellow Nyssans will die, their blood soaking the lands of Exodus.”

Their blades sang against each other and Orsia finally pinioned his sword against the wall. They stood close—entirely too comfortably close—and their eyes locked.

“And you know all this, how?” Orsia asked.

“I have my sources,” Khavren said. “What I do, I do to stop a mad empress who will destroy us all. She will shatter a century of unification and plunge us back into the horrors of war. “You must see that.” He touched her hand on her sword handle. His eyes were bright. “You *must*.”

Orsia bit her lip. Khavren’s story sounded like something his bard, Chenoa Gryn, might have invented to entertain children, were it not so terrifying. Orsia didn’t know the truth of any of it—barely understood the politics—but Khavren seemed in earnest. His need

was as intoxicating as the rich wine, and she wondered which was going to her head. She wanted so badly to believe him, if only to share in that same burning passion. Never mind that what he was suggesting seemed insane.

"I want you, Orsia Wentworth. Now and tomorrow." He kissed her gently and drew away, fires burning in his eyes. "If that is what you want."

That did it. Orsia kissed him back, much harder and more assertively. "Yes," she said. "Yes."

Her last thought, before the demands of the outside world fell away behind the burning needs of the moment, was that Dell would *kill* her after this.

#

Dell glared. "I'm going to *kill* you, Orsia Wentworth!"

The instant Orsia had crossed into their inn that morning, Dell had stood bolt up and stared at her with wide eyes. She looked haggard and worn, as if she hadn't slept or bathed in days, but it did nothing to dampen the ferocity of her glare. If Dell were a spellcaster of some sort, her expression probably would have been the somatic component of some lethal spell. Perhaps with a fanciful name such as "visage of destruction." Orsia had too much imagination for her own good, sometimes.

Orsia replied shakily, "Right, I can explain—"

"Explain?" Dell caught the collar of Orsia's shirt in her fists and shook her as one might a naughty child. "No word! No suggestion that you might even be alive! Just whisked away in the crowd! Do you have any idea how terrified I've been? *Any idea!*"

"Missed you, too," Orsia said.

Dell showed no sign of succumbing to Orsia's deflections. "I thought you were kidnapped or dead or both, probably!" she said. "Where have you been?"

"Recuperating," Orsia said. "With Khavren."

As she'd expected, just the mention of Khavren's name made Dell's eyes go wide and her face flush. "*With* Khavren?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Well, in his room," Orsia said. "He's been keeping me safe until the duel."

"That—that makes sense, actually," Dell said. "It was almost a riot in the plaza yesterday."

Dell ushered her to a private table, where she pressed Orsia for everything she could share: what had befallen after the duel, details about Khavren, thoughts about the impending fight. The revelation of Khavren's identity—that he had been the plain-dressed lad all along—took her momentarily by surprise, but then it only served to increase her excitement. The romantic mystery of Khavren of the Lightning Blade was not at all curbed

for Dell. On that note, Orsia made sure not to mention all the lovemaking they'd done that previous night, on the not-terribly far-off chance that Dell's head would have exploded. The woman seemed stressed enough.

"Are you ready for the duel?" Dell asked. "Everyone wants to see Khavren. Thousands have already shown up, and the empress herself is supposed to attend."

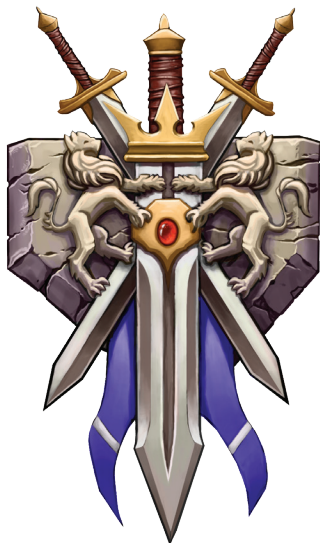
Orsia shivered. Things were moving so fast, and she could barely make sense of it. "Dell," she said, all the details of Khavren's plans on her tongue.

"Yes?" Dell looked up at her, eyes bright and hopeful.

I've agreed to assassinate an empress, she thought but didn't say.

Orsia shook her head. "Thanks," she said. "Thanks for caring about me."

Dell grinned. "Of course, you idiot," she said. "Now let's get you prepared for the fight."



PART SIX

Rhone Plaza swam with people, crammed like greasy, carnivorous fish swarming a chunk of chum thrown into their midst.

Thousands of onlookers pushed and jostled for a view of the tournament space. It seemed as though the entire city had turned out to see the Great Khavren, from the small-born and poor to the noble and very powerful. Men and women in the plate armor and tabards of imperial soldiers stood careful guard around a viewing box, itself filled with robed figures that reclined on couches and divans. Their ceremonial entrance was almost complete, having started an hour before, and most of the gathered throng had long since lost interest in watching.

Orsia herself only looked up when the trumpets redoubled in volume and seemingly also in number, and she caught her breath to see Cassandra Eland arrive, flanked by a score of soldiers. With her elaborately styled honey-blonde hair, the empress was instantly recognizable to all assembled, and not just because her portrait adorned common rooms and streets all around the city. Tall, muscular, and bearing a distinctive scar along the side of her face, she represented by her mere presence the strength and resolve that the people of this land valued in themselves. Like any great leader, Cassandra captured their imagination and gave them something to aspire to become.

Too bad, Orsia thought, that it was all some kind of horrible lie.

Watching the empress take her seat, Orsia could not help but remember Khavren's words about Cassandra. They'd seemed fantastic and impossible, his accusations of regicide and his portrayal of her as a spiteful child whose jealousy would bring down the Caneus Empire, but Orsia could not help wondering if they had some truth to them. She wondered if it even mattered.

Chenoa Gryn appeared, rising into the air as though lifted by an invisible hand. Orsia suspected a bit of bardic magic at play. Other than his voice, the prymidian hadn't demonstrated anything of the sort so far in the tournament, but she recognized a natural performer when she saw one. Khavren had picked him very well for a hireling.

"Lords and ladies, Nyssans and travelers, be welcome," he said in a voice that boomed around the plaza. He turned to the box and bowed deeply. "Your Majesty, Empress Eland, and esteemed members of the royal family. You do us great honor by your presence."

Orsia hadn't noticed the blonde woman sitting at Cassandra's side—her younger sister Sienna, the imperial executor and chief administrator. Her face was a beautiful mask, and Orsia wondered how much she knew of her sister's alleged crimes. Could the executor be complicit in regicide and treason?

The empress rose and trumpets blasted the crowd to silence. When she spoke, her voice carried over Rhone Plaza through definite magical enhancement.

"People of Nyssa," Cassandra said, lifting one hand. "You have ennobled this tournament by your faith and commitment, and I shall ennoble it further. Whoever might triumph this day, I shall feast in splendor at my palace to honor his—or her—valor and skill." She smiled as her people cheered.

This, Orsia thought, was part of Khavren's plan. He'd told her the empress would do this or something like it, as her vanity would not allow a commoner's tournament to steal the attention from herself. How well he knew her, this woman he so despised.

"Presenting for your pleasure," Gryn said, sweeping his arms high. "A scrapper who has fought her way through every opponent, winning even when the day seemed lost, and doing it all with flair and panache. A warrior who has stolen your hearts as well as every victory from the very claws of defeat. She is, your *champ-ion*—" He drew out the word, particularly the last syllable, which became rolling thunder as the crowded masses started cheering louder and louder. Finally he indicated her, allowing the rising tension to explode. "Orsia *Wentworth!*"

The gathered people erupted in applause and cheers so loud Orsia felt them like a wind pushing down upon her. It took real effort to walk out onto the dueling field, and she tried hard not to stumble with thousands of eyes upon her. In particular, when she saw Empress Cassandra looking at her with those icy blue eyes of hers, Orsia's knees felt weak. She ripped her rapier out of its scabbard and cut what she hoped was a fanciful, impressive salute through the air. At least no one seemed to interpret it as a threatening gesture. The adoration grew louder.

Gryn raised his arms for attention, and the crowd fell utterly silent. Orsia could hear the faint rustle of leather shoes on cobblestones and the occasional cough, but that was all. Many of them had ached for this moment since the tournament began, and even those new to the field clamored for a chance to see the famous adventurer Khavren revealed for all to see.

“And now,” the bard said, his cadence like that of an arcane ritual. “Infamous for his speed and skill throughout the lands of Exodus, the subject of tale and rumor. He who has slain dragons, First Ones, and other foes of the living. Myth, man, and legend all wrapped in one. I give you, Khavren of the *Lightning Blade*!”

The man who emerged from the crowd did not meet their tremendous expectations. Orsia could tell that much by the way their cheers fell away into confused murmurs. He was small, for one thing—hardly taller or wider than her, and certainly his body lacked the proportions of a hero of legend. He was just a man: hard, wiry, and deadly. He drew back the hood of the simple gray cloak he wore against the wintry drizzle, and his face seemed entirely too common. Orsia heard a watcher nearby wonder aloud if this was all some kind of jest. Only when he drew back his cloak and unsheathed his flashing rapier, causing it to light up with crackling lightning that bathed the plaza in radiance, did folk cheer for Khavren the Quick. His dedication to showmanship was one of the things Orsia loved about him.

Love?

Damn. That was not something Orsia needed to be thinking about right now. She had a regicide to take part in—or at least she had to decide if she would really go through with it. It just seemed so wrong, but Khavren was as gloriously persuasive as he was fantastic in bed. She could hardly think straight. If only Orsia had been able to discuss it with Dell, but involving her friend in imminent, potentially doomed treason was just something she could not do. She felt lost.

Daydreaming again. Orsia woke back to awareness when Khavren saluted her with his blade. Chenoa Gryn had been speaking, but Orsia hadn’t heard any of it. Reiterating the rules, no doubt.

“Are you ready?” Khavren asked.

She nodded and returned the gesture.

The first time they crossed blades, lightning crackled and a deafening tumult rose from the crowd. In her surprise Orsia missed a parry, and the flat of Khavren’s enchanted sword slapped against her wrist. It felt like being stabbed with a hot poker, sending pain lancing up her arm and through her whole body. Her arm snapped back like a whip, dragging her around in a spin downward to the ground. He could have stepped forward and finished her, but instead she saw only mild annoyance on his face. Then he backed away, raising his sword high to stir up the crowd. All part of the show.

Orsia staggered to her feet, her body still twitching from the aftereffects of the shock. She'd only rarely been hit by lightning magic before, and she didn't much care for it.

"First hit to Khavren—" Chenoa Gryn was saying even as Orsia lunged for Khavren's back, startling the crowd. She roared in challenge and warning, so he could defend himself. He batted aside her attack easily enough. The cries fell away and the crowd watched in rapt silence.

They danced around one another, constantly shifting their weight from foot to foot. Steel slashed and kissed, and they fought an acrobatic duel back and forth. For a long time, the count stood at one for Khavren, none for Orsia. She lost herself in the rhythm and flow of their fight, which had become a kind of dance. She felt Khavren's moves before she saw them, and reacted in perfect time. There was an intimacy to their duel, a singular fluid sharing of purpose that made Orsia feel closer to him than she had the night before in his arms.

And yet, as they fought, Orsia felt a growing discord between them. She'd started this day convinced, but when the fight began she'd had a moment of doubt that grew and redoubled until indecision racked her. Could she do this? Take part in killing her empress? Her heart screamed at her not to do it, her mind had doubts about Khavren's claims, and her body—well. It longed for him.

Khavren slipped past her guard and tagged her once more with his lightning sword, this time in the right thigh, which immediately went dead under her. Orsia gave a yelp and fell to the muddy cobbles. Khavren didn't even look at her before turning to the gathered people. The glory seemed to energize him, even as it made Orsia feel weak and tired.

This time when she struck, Orsia made no sound of warning, but instead rolled over and stabbed from the cobblestones. Her rapier pierced Khavren's rear boot just before he could pull away, and he staggered back, wincing as he put weight on the foot.

"Two hits for Khavren," Gryn said, "one for Orsia!"

The crowd cheered louder.

Orsia got to her feet, and she and Khavren locked swords almost instantly. His face was starting to sweat, and his eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

"What are you doing?" he asked, eyebrows knitting in frustration.

"Fighting," Orsia said. "You should try it."

Furious, Khavren threw himself at her, but she leaped away and swatted aside his seeking rapier. She even slashed him across the hand for his trouble, tying their score at two each. This duel was to be fought to five hits, like the battle against Tane.

When they cheered louder than ever before, Orsia realized that she had more of the crowd than Khavren did. The longer she stood against him, the more her star rose and his faded. And from the look on his face, Khavren knew that and hated it.

Now, it was no longer the choreographed dance but an actual fight. She got that clearly enough when Khavren landed his third hit, stabbing her in the right arm with his lightning sword. The slap of that steel had hurt enough, but this thrust left a burning hole that made her arm seize up into a useless husk. She transferred her rapier to her left hand to whooping admiration from the onlookers.

They fought on, keeping their scores even. She struck him—a glancing hit to his shoulder—and he answered with a withering riposte that shocked the wind right out of her even as it just grazed her side. Four hits to her three. No one expected her to win anyway—no one but Orsia herself.

The crowd was on its feet, including the empress and her entourage. This was the moment. Khavren wheeled around with a flourish, palming a throwing dagger.

Without even thinking, Orsia batted the dagger ringing to the cobblestones, then lunged at Khavren, whose eyes went wide. He'd expected that to hit. He managed a defense, barely, and she smashed through to stab him in the stomach, then punch him in the face with the hilt of her rapier. He fell back, startled, and she stood over him, heaving.

What had happened?

“Five hits!” Gryn’s ever-stoic voice became a shout of triumph. “Orsia Went—!”

That was all she heard before the crowd drowned out the bard’s words. Her heart fluttered and her body burned all over. She felt like she could pull free of her skin and fly into the air.

Only Khavren’s stricken face drew her back to earth. At first, she worried that she had stabbed him too deep, but there didn’t seem to be much blood. Perhaps his pride was hurt—that, she could easily imagine. But no. His surprise turned to rage.

Then she remembered his plan: to kill the empress with a dagger. He’d drawn it in the heat of battle to cover his move, and Orsia had spoiled it all.

Before she could react—before she could figure out how to feel—Dell appeared, throwing her arms around Orsia’s neck. She was shouting congratulations, but Orsia couldn’t hear. She fixed her gaze on Cassandra, who was coming toward them, surrounded by her guards. The empress loomed over Orsia, who belatedly started to kneel despite the pain in her leg. She didn’t make it all the way, though, as the empress caught her in mid-kneel, fingers under her chin.

“Champion,” she said. “Are you ready for your reward?”

“Re-reward?” Orsia managed to stammer in reply.

Cassandra made a purring sound in her throat, as though considering. “Yes,” she said, eyes twinkling. “You’ll do nicely.”

Orsia awoke late that night in the breezy room at the top the Gregorian Palace, sitting up suddenly as though emerging from a fleeting nightmare. A roaring fire cast the room in partial light, but the open window meant Orsia could barely feel the heat. She sat breathing heavily, hands searching for a weapon amongst the bedclothes, but in her sleep-addled state she couldn't remember what she'd dreamed or what had awakened her.

That afternoon had passed in a blur, due partly to the lingering pain of her wounds, but mostly to the drink that had flowed like water. Empress Cassandra had paraded her around Nyssa like a trophy, with trumpets announcing their every move and Chenoa Gryn proclaiming Orsia's glories. She loved the attention even as it made her anxious, but the empress kept a firm hand, cold and hard as a manacle, on Orsia's wrist. Her lips, though—those were warm, and Orsia had trembled the first time Cassandra had kissed her when no eyes fell upon them. The empress had assumed an expression of contemplation, then kissed her again as though to gather more information. Orsia felt like a willing love slave, swept up in Cassandra's commanding charisma. And after that—

The woman in the bed beside her extended one pale arm sleepily around Orsia's waist.

Orsia Wentworth, fastest blade in the Caneus Empire, was currently in bed with Empress Cassandra Eland. This, right here, was the greatest achievement of her life.

It was only when the man in the shadows spoke that Orsia realized he was there. She'd sensed him before, but didn't truly make the connection until he split the silence. And once she saw him, with his gleaming yellow eyes, she couldn't imagine how she'd missed him before.

"You betrayed me." Khavren drew his rapier, which lit up the room in crackling yellow. He pointed it at the sleeping empress. "For that monster." Orsia rose, leaving the thick blankets behind, and stood naked between Khavren and Cassandra. She held up her hands peaceably. "It's over, Khavren," she said. "Just walk away."

For a terrible moment, his face looked stricken, and then he assumed a carefully indifferent expression. "I watched you today," he said. "Parading around like the empress's new pet. The way she held your leash. It disgusted me." He took a step closer, stretching for a duel. "I thought about you while I was climbing up here. Did she turn on me? Is this all a new plan? Halfway through the guards, I was convinced I was here to rescue you, and we'd kill this creature together. Now I see the truth."

"Halfway through..." Orsia felt cold. "What have you done?"

"What I had to do." The dancing lightning illuminated dark smears on his face. Blood. "Eight of our fellow Nyssans is a small price to pay, but their deaths could have been avoided. Their blood is on your hands, Orsia."

"You mean on yours," Orsia said. "I won't let you blame me, and I won't let you do this."

"Why?" Khavren asked. "Because the loveplay was good? Because she can offer you riches?"

“Because it’s not right.”

He offered a grimace that might have been meant as a smile. “It hardly matters now,” he said, subtly tensing. “I’ll just have to kill both of you.”

When he leaped forward, Orsia was ready for him. She leaned to the side, guiding his thrust in that direction, then slid around it. The lightning seared her skin red but the steel itself missed so narrowly that an onlooker might have thought it a skewering blow. Orsia grasped Khavren’s wrist, holding the sword away. She had no weapon, no armor, and no better plan, but at least she wasn’t being run through—nor, she made sure, was the murmuring empress as she lay helpless in her bed.

Surprised and furious, Khavren pulled a dagger from his belt with his off-hand. He raised it over Orsia’s face, and she didn’t have a hand free to fend him off. Their eyes met, and Khavren hesitated for just a heartbeat. She could see real pain in his eyes, only partly suppressed through anger. And in that instant, Orsia had the horrible sense that she had chosen wrongly.

Then she saw movement reflected in Khavren’s eyes just before the empress slammed a fist into his face, laying him flat out on the floor. She leaped atop him like a pouncing cat and slammed her fists and elbows into his face like the trained warrior she was. She’d been so tender, Orsia had almost forgotten how she’d come through the trials to determine her worth as heir to the Caneus Empire.

“How much did Bial pay you, swine?” Cassandra shrieked as she smashed Khavren’s face. “Or is the Dominion, trying to cover up their cowardice? This is an act of war, you hear me? An act of *war*!”

Khavren was far past replying. After just a few seconds, he resembled a slab of raw meat and his body started to twitch. Only when he stopped gurgling did Cassandra ease back, her hands and arms drenched in blood and spittle. She heaved a massive sigh, setting her muscular frame rippling in the fire and moonlight.

“Lady Wentworth,” she said, her voice like a dagger in Orsia’s ear. “You shall be rewarded for your faith this day.” She gestured dismissively. “Collect your things and send a guard to my chamber. This one will need to be tortured.”

Shivering in horror, Orsia bundled up her mail shirt, silks, and sword. She left the room without a word, fumbling into her clothes as she went.

She didn’t look back. Not when she headed down the staircase littered with corpses, nor when she reached the hall where confused guardsmen stared at her half-clothed form. Not when she hurried from the palace, loose clothes flapping in the night air. Not when she found Dell at the inn and told her, in no uncertain terms, that they had to leave. On the instant.

Orsia Wentworth and Dellthora Norfolk left Nyssa that night and never looked back.