Chapter 1

Blood in the Sand

The sand smelled like a slow death. In case you’ve never had the pleasure, it’s a distinct combination of blood, sweat, and shit. It’s a sweet and terrible smell, and once you’ve had a nose full of it, you don’t forget it. Then again, maybe I was wrong. I squinted at the sand. Was that a snake? Nope, that would be a chunk of something’s intestine. Steve stepped around it, his movements almost dainty. Dainty was hard for an eighteen hand battle unicorn.

You heard me.

The arena was in the center of an old abandoned horse ranch in the middle of nowhere. Either the owner was being paid to look the other way, or the promoters were squatting. We’d find out soon enough. Bleachers ringed the arena, the seats full. A high chain-link fence separated the arena and the crowd. It didn’t look like much, but I felt the magic humming through it. Someone had warded it, and as long as that magic was up, there was no getting through that fence. Or over it—the top was covered in razor wire.

The crowd sat comfortably on the other side, people wearing everything from furs and Armani to jeans, and all of them had one thing in common—they were here to make money and watch something die.

The saddle creaked beneath me as Steve stopped. Across the sand crouched a monster spawned from nightmares. The buata squealed at us, the sound shooting down my spine.

“Here, piggy, piggy.” My words came out in a singsong before I blew it a kiss. Buatas were huge, boar-like creatures from New Guinea. They had giant tusks, weighed around seven hundred pounds, and their favorite food source was humans. We taste *delicious*. I was human enough that the buata was drooling in anticipation. Though monumentally stupid on the whole, they were big, dangerous, and capable of speech.

The buata’s eyes burned red, the light flickering as they narrowed. “Not enough meat. Eat horse.” The words were rough and guttural.

*Okay then*. I didn’t say it was capable of *good* speech. The crowd moved restlessly on the stands. A few guys hooted, but most of them started stomping their feet, a rumble of “fight, fight, fight!” swelling up from the mass of humanity…and other things. Because I knew for a fact that not everything that looked human, was human. Myself included. But right now? Right now I was playing it up. I knew exactly what I looked like—blonde, late twenties. Big blue eyes. I had fucking freckles, for Odin’s sake. I looked like I stepped over from the neighboring ranch to borrow a cup of sugar.

The announcer yelled something. He lifted a starting pistol into the air. I reached for my back, sliding my hand into the neck of my T-shirt—a present from my apprentice, Jonah. It’s black and said, “Party Like a Vulcan” on it—and grabbed the cool brass rod laying flat against my spine, held there by a special harness.

Though I looked like it, I wasn’t the girl next door. I haven’t come for a cup of sugar. Like everyone else in the stands, I was there for blood. So similar, and yet we couldn’t be more different.

The pistol cracked, and Steve jolted forward. I yanked out the brass rod and screamed, punching my right arm forward while my left hand held on to the pommel. My fingers found the slight depressions in the rod and I squeezed until the ends extended, the metal sliding out with a faint hiss, becoming a spear. Rage filled my body. I knew without looking that a circlet appeared on my forehead and a cape of swan feathers flowed from my back, appearing magically as I rode into battle. That wasn’t always the case—they only appeared when I had the stamp of approval from my mother’s people. Valkyrie approval was a funny thing, adhering to an ancient code of battle that humans didn’t always understand, but I knew better than to question it.

I leaned over the pommel, my battle yell trailing behind us.

The crowd gasped. I could hear it, even over the pounding of hooves. Steve tore into the ground, sand flying everywhere, and usually the noise and force of him charging was enough to scare off anyone interested in attacking us. It was nothing compared to the charge of the buata. Despite his size, he was fast, barreling down on us. It was like staring down a Mack truck. I bared my teeth.

The buata came at us, his tusks lowered. Steve danced out of the way at the last moment, and I used my spear to slash at the boar’s side. The tip glanced off and I cursed. His hide was too thick. Though I didn’t have much experience fighting buata, I wasn’t too surprised.

We whipped around, coming back at the creature. He slashed at us this time, managing to gouge a chunk out of Steve’s hindquarters. The cut was shallow, but bleeding freely, the red bright against Steve’s white coat. The crowd bellowed in glee. This was why they were here. They wanted the splash of blood, the smell of it hitting the hot sand.

Steve was pissed, and I was getting a lot of noise from him in my head. Talking to Steve was like having sunshine and flowers poured into your mind. It sounded nice, but it could be overwhelming and unpleasant. Sunshine could burn. Flowers could be poisonous.

I leaned down, spitting sand out of my mouth before I grabbed a handful of his mane to get his attention. “Like we planned.”

Again, sunshine, the twitter of birds, the smell of fresh grass, but somehow all of those sensory details sorted out into my brain in the impression of words. I knew Steve was complaining about his pride—not to mention his ass. He desperately wanted to take the boar out himself. I got it, I really did. Sometimes you wanted to get some of your own back and to Hel with the consequences.

Steve grumbled, but I knew he wouldn’t let the boar distract him. I would deal with the buata. He charged at the creature, full tilt. I leaned to the side, hanging on to the saddle with my knees and letting go of the pommel. Steve dodged left past the boar. I swung right, grabbing onto the huge creature and landing on it’s back with a jarring thud. The move was textbook perfect, years of training and muscle memory making it fast and smooth.

The buata stunk like the sand—blood and shit. He squealed, angry, tossing his head. I’ve dropped my spear so I could hold on to his bristled hair. The creature bucked, but I hung on to him like a limpet.

“Stop fighting!” I hissed, yanking the buata’s hair.

“I will eat you while you scream!” He howled back. “Chew your bones!”

Charming. I grabbed his ear and twisted. “You don’t have to fight anymore, you stupid porkchop!” He whipped his head and I held on, waiting for him to stop. The minute he did, I reached down into my boot and pulled out my knife. It was nothing fancy—flat black, double-bladed. Solid workmanship, but easily replaced because I lost knives like nobody’s business. I jabbed the blade into the meat of his shoulder and put my weight on it. It took a lot of force to break through his thick hide, even with a razor sharp blade.

He was howling now—a furious roiling of sound. I tried one last time. “Stop! We’re busting this place up. You don’t have to fight. We can both walk away!”

He tossed his head and I yanked out the knife and dropped to the sand. I’d pissed him off enough that he had forgotten about Steve, which was the point. No, those fiery red orbs were all for me. His eyes were rabid in their intensity and hunger, and when I saw them, I knew. The buata wouldn’t be taking me up on my offer. He was too far gone. He’d forgotten the wild and the cloying smell of freedom. All he knew was sand, death, and meat.

He sucked in a breath, his chest heaving. I was ten yards from my spear. I wasn’t sure I’d make it, but trying to take down a buata with a knife was beyond idiotic. I tried to be brave, not stupid. I bolted for the spear and he moved, a thunder of hooves at my back.

He was faster, but I was smarter. I unfastened my cloak of swan feathers and it hit him in the face, blinding him. I jumped out of the way, letting him barrel past me, then I chased after him, grabbing my spear out of the sand. Blood flowed into my eyes and I wiped it away with the back of my spear hand. I didn’t even remember getting cut.

The buata tossed his head, freeing himself of the cape. He turned, dug in, and charged. I looked into his fiery eyes and saw that there was no one home. Time to finish this. The sand churned under his hooves as he plowed toward me. I waited, my spear in one hand, my knife in the other. When he got close enough, I dropped to my knees, plunging the butt of my spear into the sand for support, my hands holding it steady and angling the tip into the boar’s chest. He slammed into it, the crash of his weight dislodging me from the weapon. He hit me with the sides of his tusks, tossing me out of the way, and bruising me from shoulder to hip. I was lucky he didn’t manage to hit me with the sharp tips.

I crashed onto the ground and rolled, throwing myself back at him. He looked dazed from the battle, his blood gushing around the spearhead. It was a fatal wound, but he hadn’t realized it yet. I ran, slid down on my knees, and slashed up with my knife. My timing was perfect and I skated through the sand, my blade opening the buata’s throat from ear to ear. Hot blood washed over me, covering my face and arms. The rank stench of it was thick in my nostrils, making me open my mouth to breathe. Which meant I got some blood in my mouth. Then I was free of him, and I came to a stop, kneeling in the sand. I heard the gurgle and thud of the buata behind me, while I leaned over and spit the blood out of my mouth. My life was so glamorous.

Silence cloaked the arena, the only sound the rough saw of my breathing. I looked up through my mask of blood at the crowd, stunned in their seats. The silence stretched out. Then as one, they leapt to their feet, screaming their approval. None of them seemed to wonder where my mount had gone. All of them were too busy watching the fight. But I saw him as he put his head down and bucked, his back feet kicking into the gate. The gate fell and with it the magic ward placed on the arena. I felt the magic as it blinked out of existence. There was nothing keeping us from the crowd anymore. They didn’t notice. They cheered and hugged and grabbed money away from bookies. Some cried, their fortunes lost.

They didn’t know the half of it.

As one, my sisters appeared behind them. A dozen enraged warrior women, their spears held loosely to their sides, their capes catching the light. They were vengeance. They were cold fury in human form. And they were here to kick ass.

The people got what they wanted—they got to see something die. They made their money. Now we get what we wanted.

Justice.

That’s when the screaming really started.

I picked up my spear, grabbed my cape, and went to join my sisters. I didn’t want to miss the fun.