

BLOOD AND SAND

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy—
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue—
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men.
Julius Caesar, 3.1.269–277



Spartacus was a Thracian from the nomadic tribes
and not only had a great spirit and great physical
strength, but was much more than one would
expect . . .

Plutarch of Chaeronea, A.D. 100

CHAPTER 1



They called them slaves.

In the shadow of the Coliseum, through the paved streets of Rome, armed guards dragged them by the neck. Rusted iron shackles cut at their wrists and ankles. Each labored breath was fouled by the bitter stench of the city. Old and new blood darkened the rope that bound them together. Clumps of hair, torn fingernails, and other bits were trapped in the heavy, twisted strands. It was a rope that had been used many times before.

A crowd of dusty citizenry parted to let them pass, urged along by the guards and watchmen flanking the slaves on their walk to the auction block.

Twenty-one women in total, and they all averted their eyes, trembled with terror. All but one.

At the very end of the line, a slight figure lifted her head and stared around her, her gaze steady, penetrating. The dirt and mud that streaked her face wasn't enough to hide her disgust.

She knew what was going to happen to her and the others. She knew the warped rules by which the Romans played. Patricians and plebeians. Masters and slaves. They all filled their roles without exception. It didn't matter who she was sold to, just that she would be *sold*. She would be bought, and she would be paid for, and she would be a slave.

She tried to summon calming pictures of her home—the salty air that drummed against the walls of her father's tent, the alternating calm and fury of the Aegean, the stormy gray of her mother's eyes. But the pictures quickly turned to images of carnage and violence.

She'd been a warrior once, and free. Now she was the only one left, the last Thracian the world would never know. She wondered if history would remember the genocide of the Maedi, the annihilation of her people.

Doubtful, she thought. History only serves the winner.

Roma victrix.

She knew she didn't have the luxury of denial—not if she was going to survive. So when the bloodstained rope pulled her forward with a sharp jerk, she focused instead on her training and her discipline and managed to remain steady.

"Keep moving," the guard behind her grumbled.

Gripping her rope with bleeding fingers, she spat into the sand and walked on.

When she was young, her father, Sparro—swordlord of the legendary Maedi and war-king of Thrace—shot a barbed arrow into the heavens. The lives of his wife and unborn son had been claimed in childbirth, and brimming with grief, he forswore his people's gods. In a single night, he'd lost everything. Everything except for his young daughter, and in spite of his sorrow and resentment, he called her to his side.

It was the first time in her memory that all of their people

were gathered together. Though their villages were separated by miles of mountain and field, all of Thrace stood as one that day—a proud mass of thousands upon thousands, stretching along the unforgiving coastline of the Aegean. They waited to see if their king would defy the gods one more time. To the east, the sea waited, too, silent and still. Not a single white wave crashed against the rocks below.

The crowning sun glinted off a pendant cradled in King Sparro's palm: finely wrought silver molded into the shape of a falcon in flight. The bird's bright wings spread wide, every feather carved in stunning detail. Its talons clutched undulating waves, and in place of its heart sat a large, clear stone that blazed in the dawn light.

Thracians of old called the pendant *zhimanteia*—"fire of the immortals"—a jewel meant for the swordlord's heir, the crown prince.

A serving woman brought forward a needle and a length of thread, and King Sparro himself made quick, neat stitches, fastening the pendant onto a new cloak. Then he draped the wool across his daughter's thin shoulders so that the pendant rested heavily against her heart.

Even heavier were the words he spoke next.

"I name Attia, my daughter."

Only a moment of silence passed before Crius, Sparro's first captain, raised his sword into the air and cried out the child's name. "*Attia!*"

It was a testament to their loyalty and their love that, without hesitation, all of the people took up the cry. And then as one, ten thousand honored soldiers of Thrace—Maedi warriors all—fell to their knees before the girl. The red of their cloaks spread out like a sea of blood.

Attia became her father's heir that day, the first future queen

and swordmaiden of Thrace, destined to rule the greatest warrior kingdom the world had seen since ancient Sparta.

She was seven years old.

Now, ten years later, the once-crown princess found herself bound at the end of the line of new slaves. A fresh piece of meat up for auction, paraded onto a rotting wood platform in the middle of a small plaza. The twenty-one bound women were strangers to each other, all dressed in various shades of filth. At the opposite end of the line from Attia, one woman began to sob. Her shoulders shook with despair as the merchant gripped the back of her neck, shoved her forward, and began the bidding.

The Republic had conquered nearly half of the known world, its rule reaching from the western coast of Germanica to the eastern jungles of Siam. Even the dialects of Thrace shared much with the Latin Vulgate—the common tongue of the Republic. But at that moment, Attia wished it didn't because she understood the merchant's words all too well. "Who will give one denarius for this one? She is strong yet. Look." He slapped the woman's hip. "Pair her with your largest field worker, and she could breed two or three more, easily."

Bile rose in Attia's throat.

The woman he was talking about became rigid with terror. Her eyes flicked back and forth like those of a wounded animal, never once settling as the voices around her rose.

There were at least four dozen people in the crowd, all waving their hands and shouting their bids with enthusiasm. It wasn't often that an auction of foreign women like this took place, and the bidding didn't last for very long. Silver changed hands, the rope was cut, and the woman at the end of the line was dragged away by a middle-aged man in a blue tunic.

Attia was so tired, so full of rage for her own circumstances

that she couldn't find the energy to pity the woman. She just stared at the soft line of her bared shoulder until she disappeared, barely even recognizing the fact that the other woman was real.

The nature of the sale became clear soon enough. The women who wept and showed fear were bought by the sadists in the crowd—the ones who enjoyed broken things. The women who looked dry-eyed and defiant were claimed for the brothels. The oldest women were bought by the few female patricians present, probably to clean floors or serve food.

Then, at the very end, Attia's turn came. She stood alone on the planks. There was still a large crowd gathered, despite the other women having already been sold. Attia tried to school her face to look as benign and uninteresting as possible though her blood boiled with contempt.

"And finally," the merchant said, "we come to the prize of the day—a true Thracian beauty. She—"

Before the merchant could say another word, the shouting began, echoing up against the clay walls surrounding the alley. Most of the bidders offered increasing amounts of money, while others tried to sweeten the deal with promises of horses or trades of other slaves. It seemed that everyone wanted the exotic girl from across the Aegean, the first Thracian woman to be captured in nearly a decade.

Only one man stayed silent as he watched from a shadowy corner of the alley. His white hair was cropped short, his mouth pinched into a thin line. His clothing was simple and unadorned but obviously expensive; the silk of his robe shimmered even in the shade. Beside him stood another man, this one dark and hard-muscled. He wore a loose blue tunic with wide sleeves that didn't reach his elbows. His eyes swept over and around the crowd, ever watchful.

“Eighty denarii!” a fat patrician shouted, licking his lips.

It was the highest bid yet, but the merchant waved his hands wildly over the crowd. “Is there a counteroffer?”

The old man in the corner carefully regarded Attia with cold blue eyes before speaking. “Five hundred denarii,” he said, keeping his gaze on Attia’s face.

The fat patrician sputtered. “Five hundred—you can’t be serious!”

“Five hundred denarii,” the man repeated, “and let that be the end of it.”

The merchant beamed and sent a prayer of thanks to all the gods he could name. “Sold! Well bought, Timeus. Well bought!”

The fat patrician tried to argue again, but the auction was over. The other bidders reluctantly dispersed, grumbling as they went. The merchant waited for Timeus and his bodyguard to approach before saying, “I was almost certain Marius was going to challenge you.”

Timeus looked unfazed. “He’s too cheap to challenge me.”

“She is well worth it,” the merchant continued. “Young, spirited, in perfect health, and—as I wrote to you—I have it on excellent authority that she was not defiled after her capture. She is absolutely pure.”

Timeus smiled, the calm expression nearly transforming his pinched face. He looked almost kind, until the smile tightened into a cold, harsh line. He tossed a heavy pouch at the merchant, a dismissal as much as a payment. Then to his bodyguard, he said, “Take her, Ennius. She has a job to do.”

The merchant could barely contain his glee. He was glad to be rid of the stubborn whelp and thrilled with the small fortune he’d made off her sale. She hadn’t stopped struggling since the moment of her capture, so he had kept her tightly shackled and bound for the journey to the city. The merchant sneered as he

removed the iron that bound Attia's wrists and ankles. "Good luck, little Thracian."

For the first time in two weeks, Attia flexed her tightened limbs, pain and relief surging together.

The bodyguard reached out a dark, scarred hand to take hold of the rope still hanging loosely around her neck. "Steady, girl," he said. "Relax."

Relax? Attia would have laughed if her throat didn't feel like it had been stuffed with sand. Instead, she looked away from the bodyguard and took in her surroundings.

The little plaza was nearly empty by then. The windows and doors were covered and closed. The alley was narrow, and the vigiles—the watchmen charged with keeping law and order within the city limits—were hardly being vigilant. The nearest one was more than a hundred yards away and preoccupied with a prostitute flashing her wares. Attia saw it all in a single breath. The distance. The positioning.

The opportunity.

The bodyguard was speaking again, and his hand was closing around the rope. "Don't try to fight."

Attia met his eyes with a sudden, unexpected smile.

Challenge accepted.

She snatched the end of the rope from the man's grasp and looped it around his neck, the wiry strands of the cord digging into her bloody hands in the process. With a quick jump, she wedged her feet against the bodyguard's knee and pulled down, hard and fast. There was a wet pop—like pulling apart a roasted chicken thigh—right before they both fell to the ground in a pile of dust and limbs.

Attia gritted her teeth as the pain in her arm flared up toward her shoulder. But just like that, Ennius the bodyguard became damaged goods, crying out and clutching a broken leg

that bent at a disturbingly sharp angle. There was not even any blood.

Crius would be proud.

Timeus's pale face turned an impressive shade of burgundy as Attia struggled to her feet again. White spots crowded her vision, and she tried to ignore the rocks and debris that cut into her skin.

"Foolish bitch," Timeus growled before rushing at her.

It was a wholehearted effort, but silly, really. Attia extended her leg and kicked him full in the face with the heel of her foot. With a distinct crunch, his nose shattered, and Timeus fell heavily on top of his bodyguard, eliciting pained screams from the both of them.

Shock and fear were written all over the merchant's face. He clutched his bulging purse before turning and hurrying as fast as he could down the street.

Attia had lifted the rope from around her neck and was beginning to wrap it around her bleeding hand. There was just enough length at the end of it to fit twice around Timeus's neck. She took a step toward him as he shouted through a mouthful of blood.

"*Stop her!*"

The distracted vigil finally took notice of what was happening at the end of the alley and moved to confront her.

Attia actually smiled through the pain.

Her people were a peculiar tribe. Direct descendants of the Spartans of old, Maedi soldiers were hardened by physical labor, honed and bent and reshaped so that the resulting body and psyche reacted like coiled springs. Pain could be tolerated or even ignored. A sword or bow or staff or even a rock was simply an extension of the self. Fighting was instinctual, natural, effortless. Sparro carried—*had* carried—a sword that weighed al-

most as much as Attia did, and Crius could pin a man to the wall with his spear.

Attia wasn't particularly strong. She certainly wasn't big. But she was a Thracian—a warrior of the Maedi. And this poor, stupid vigil was not.

Attia continued to wrap the filthy rope around her hand as she turned to face the watchman. Timeus and his bodyguard—still immobile on the ground—could only stare as the vigil unsheathed his sword and swung pathetically at Attia, missing by more than a few inches. She dodged the weapon with ease before smashing her rope-hardened fist into the center of the watchman's chest, putting all of her weight behind the concentrated blow. It knocked him back only a little, and pain exploded across Attia's wounded arm and wrist. But a soft snapping sound told her she'd hit her mark. The vigil managed to take just two steps before he fell face-first to the ground, the triangular piece of bone at the apex of his ribs having punctured his heart.

There was no one around who could stop her now. Ennius writhed on the ground, trying and failing to stand on his shattered leg. Timeus barely managed to push himself up to his knees before falling down again with a groan. Still, it took Attia a moment to clear out the dense fog in her head.

Move, she told herself through the pain, the dizziness, the loss of blood and breath. *Move*.

With the rope still wrapped around her fist, she turned on her heel and ran.

The warm air whipped against her face, stinging the little cuts and welts she'd acquired on the journey to Rome. The walls of the city were a brown blur. Everything seemed coated in dust, even though the late afternoon sun lent a slight golden haze to the air. Attia moved so quickly that her feet barely seemed to touch the ground, and for a single brief moment, she relished

her victory. *I've escaped. I've made it.* Two young vigiles turned into the alley just then, their eyes widening at the sight of her running with the rope still dangling from her hand. They reached for their weapons. *Or not.*

Attia cut to the left and into another alley so narrow that she could brush the walls on either side with her fingertips. Just as the vigiles appeared around the corner behind her, she leaped up and braced her right foot against the wall. There was enough momentum in the motion that she was able to bounce off and plant her left foot on the opposite wall. She did it over and over, back and forth, climbing like a mountain goat with her cracked and bleeding feet. She didn't stop until she reached the fourth-floor window on the northeast corner of a crumbling insula—one of the multilevel apartments built to house the poor.

Attia hooked an arm through the small opening of the window and tumbled into a stark room. A woman screamed and shrank back against the door, trying to hide a little boy behind her. The shouts of vigiles echoed up from the street below. Attia briefly considered climbing back out the window when she saw light shifting near the base of the wall. The cheap clay insulas were already caving in on themselves. The wall separating this room from the next had begun to collapse and tilt away from the outer wall. The shift had created a narrow crawl space at its base, and Attia dove in.

The makeshift tunnel was so tight and jagged that she had to wriggle through on her belly, and for a moment, she wondered if she'd been too hasty. But she could still move—just barely—and it was better than capture. She could hear someone pounding on the door of the apartment she'd just left. She crawled forward, trying to keep her breath even as she made her way through the passage, not knowing what waited on the other side. Her hands left bloody prints in the dirt. She crawled for

another thirty yards before she finally saw another shifting light ahead. At last, the little tunnel curved upward, and she emerged onto a rooftop. The setting sun had already cast the road below in shadow. This sunset marked nearly four days without proper sleep, two without food. But she couldn't afford to stop.

Attia climbed down to the darkened road, turned north, and forced herself to start running again. For a few minutes, she began to think she might actually escape. But her luck ran out. Three vigiles rounded the corner with swords drawn.

"There she is!" one of them shouted.

Attia slowed her pace and considered her opponents. Perhaps, in years past, the old vigil leading the group had been a vigorous young soldier, fighting for the glory of Rome. But time had turned him gray and made him very, very slow.

Still holding the rope in her hand, Attia made two wide loops at each end of its dirty length. Darting forward, she threw one looped end around the neck of the closest vigil. The knot tightened and she dragged him to the ground, rolling out of the way as the other two tried to attack her. She caught the second one with the other loop of rope, then used her captives to knock over the old vigil. Within moments, all three were sprawled on the ground. Dazed, humiliated, and sore, but alive.

Footsteps. Marching. More vigiles.

Attia picked up one of the watchmen's swords from the dust and, with a quick glance around her, ran and cut into an alley.

Left. Right. Left again. Backtrack to avoid two more vigiles who'd joined the chase. Then up a rough-hewn wall onto a flat rooftop.

To the east, she saw darkening clouds. A sharp rock formation on the side of a hill reached up like a fingertip to brush against the evening sky. Attia knew that beyond that hill was a valley, and beyond that valley was a mountain pass, and beyond

that was the Adriatic. Then, across the salty sea—the border of Thrace. *Home*.

The streets below her began to fill with an unexpected audience. The spectacle of a female slave escaping with sword in hand was met with both heckling and cheers.

“Someone catch her! She’s getting away!”

“Keep running! Don’t stop!”

Some even looked as though they were trying their damndest to hinder the vigiles who gave chase. All Attia knew was that she had to keep moving. Fighting through waves of nausea and dizziness, she took off across the rooftops, using them like stepping stones as she leapt across alleys and narrow streets, always going east.

She didn’t stop until she’d come to the outskirts of the city. Behind her, the crowded clay insulas of the poor loomed in growing shadow, while up ahead were the open farmlands, grazing pastures, and sleek estates of the patricians. The dirt beneath her bare feet changed from dust and rock to soil and grass. Her breathing was even, and her muscles sang with the thrill of a chase. Attia paused to watch the sun set over the lip of the horizon, staining the sky red as the moon rose. There wouldn’t be any darkness. She’d have to move fast. The long finger of the hill was still to the northeast, but shrouded in clouds.

Then she heard it—boots thundering against the earth. They moved in formation between a march and a run. And there were more of them. Dozens more. *All this for a single runaway slave?*

Attia was certain they didn’t know who she was. If they did, she would surely have been executed long before reaching Rome. But there was no time to think about it. She adjusted her grip on her stolen sword—ready for whatever might come—and started to run again.

The estates gave way to wide, empty fields. The nearly

barren land was like a memorial to the thousands of trees and roots and animals destroyed in the making of the city. There was nowhere to hide, no sanctuary or haven. The boots of the vigiles were nearly upon her.

Attia wanted to go home. She wanted to see her father's warrior frame bent in concentration over his beloved letters and scrolls. She wanted to see the familiar bloodred wool of the Maedi cloaks. She wanted to run and run until her breath was spent, until the ashes of her bones mingled with those of her people.

But they're dead.

Above her, the moon rose, the sky blazed, the mountains themselves seemed to sink into the deep, and her people—every single person she had ever known—were dead.

I am dead.

And suddenly, she realized there was nothing left to run to.

She stopped running in the middle of a flat field, and within moments, the vigiles surrounded her in a wide circle of black and iron.

I am nothing. Attia is nothing. Not a name or a sound. There is no me. There is only a ghost of Thrace.

She felt herself going numb as one of the vigiles approached with chains in his extended hands. Moonlight glinted off a silver ring on his middle finger—a tiny, snarling wolf's head. His hand and that ring seemed to move in slow motion. Closer and closer.

It was instinct more than a conscious choice. Attia was just as surprised as the vigil when she deftly grabbed the man's wrist and pulled him *toward* her, right onto her stolen blade. She looked coldly into his eyes as his expression changed from one of shock to agony. Blood oozed from his belly and his mouth, staining the front of his uniform. Attia pushed him off her sword and let him fall to the ground with a dull thud.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

A startled laugh burst from her throat, and she didn't try to hold it back.

The vigiles shuffled uneasily around her like a pack of anxious wolves, wary now, confused, perhaps even frightened.

Attia's maniacal laughter warped into a scream, and then the scream became a keening that echoed against the bare trees, up to the swollen moon above. It was wordless, sharp, and high, a bone-deep lament that silenced the Roman beasts that surrounded her.

Perhaps it was almost over. Perhaps now, the darkness would bring some kind of peace.

"Stop!" The word shattered the tension in the field.

Out of the corner of her eye, Attia saw a mounted centurion, the plumes of his helmet rustling in the wind. His presence only made the vigiles more confused, and Attia understood. A centurion was a Roman officer, not one to involve himself in the simple business of city watchmen.

"She has been bought and paid for by the House of Timeus," the centurion said. "Seize and disarm her, but do not kill her."

The order finally brought the vigiles to their senses. They raised their swords, and more out of habit than anything else, Attia raised hers, too. Relying on reflex and muscle memory, she managed to strike down more than a few before their numbers and her exhaustion got the better of her.

They descended like a swarm.