Chapter 19

I Hope Everyone Here Is Getting Hazard Pay

Besides the crowd gathering, the park looked deserted. I couldn’t hear or see a thing. That didn’t bother me. Looks were, of course, deceiving and it’s not like these fights were advertised to the general public. Someone had erected a chain link fence at the edge of the parking lot. It stretched out, curving around the park area. I couldn’t see where it ended. Though it looked like a plain-old chain link fence, I highly doubted it was one. There was a gap ahead where two men stood, both wearing suits cut to their hulking frames. Bouncers to keep the riffraff out.

I let Edda take the lead as our group followed everyone toward the gap, waiting our turn to show the guards our invitation. It didn’t look like much security, but I would bet good money that there were several layers of safeguards that we weren’t seeing. Until we knew what those might be, we’d have to pretend to be nonchalant. We were just like the other fighters, nothing more.

Edda handed over our invitation when it was our turn to check in. One of the guards took it while the other stared at us like he was trying to see all the way down to our bones. The first bodyguard waved a hand over our invitation, muttering a word as he did. I couldn’t make out what he said, but whatever it was, it made the image of a feather on our invitation flutter like a breeze had come through. Which was apparently what it was supposed to do, because he stepped aside so we could enter.

“Combatants head to the left to get checked in. Anyone not fighting in your group needs to go to the right and find a seat.”

That was the only information we were given before stepping past the gate.

The minute my foot hit the grass on the other side, I paused. The gate had been heavily warded. A second ago I’d looked ahead, hearing nothing, my gaze on an empty park. The second I stepped through, the illusion dissolved.

Temporary lights had been brought in, making the area glow like it was an actual arena. The park grounds were a cacophony of noise and movement. A tent large enough to host a small circus had been erected off to the left—a temporary area for fighters to check in, suit up, and be inspected. I could see at least three guards around the tent. Off to the right, a few more guards were directing spectators to the bleachers that had been set up. To the side of those guards there were two small booths set up. One was taking bets and marking odds. Not everyone was handing over stacks of cash—some were handling things electronically—but I had no doubt that large sums of money were in play. The other booth was selling beer and food. The fight had a concession stand. Of course it did. Garm lifted his head and sniffed.

“I don’t think you want those hot dogs,” I told him quietly. “You have no idea what they’re made of.” After all, not everything here was human, and the food selection would reflect that. I grabbed my dad’s shirt sleeve. “I don’t think you should eat or drink anything while you’re here. Just in case.”

He didn’t try to argue, just patted my hand. “I’ll buy a beer to fit in, but I won’t drink it.” He stepped away and my hand dropped. “Kick ass, sweetheart.”

I grinned at him. “I’ll make you proud.”

“You always do,” he said over his shoulder as he walked over to the concession stand. I was tempted to send a little prayer up to the gods to protect my father in the crowd, but I didn’t. You never knew which god might be listening, and not all of them were friendly.

Edda entered the tent first, followed by Grant, then me and Garm. Once inside we had to sign in, giving the woman at the little table the number of our party. A lot of times when I fought, we’d have to give them more information—a name, a designation. Unfortunately, we did have to give a team name. This caused a momentary hiccup because we didn’t have one. Maybe other teams had been given more information with their invites than we had, since our invite came from Loki and not normal channels.

Edda was quick on her feet. “Battle Wolves.”

The woman looked up from the sign in sheet, snapping her gum at us. “We already have a Battle Wolves.”

Edda looked at me. I shrugged. My mind had gone blank the minute the lady had asked.

“Ancile,” Edda said.

The woman stared for several seconds before sighing and looking down at her sheet. “You’re going to have to spell it.” Edda complied and the woman handed us four golden chains. We took them and she pointed at our necks. “Everyone has to wear a chain. No chain, you don’t fight. Even the dog.”

“Wolf,” Grant correct.

The lady didn’t appear to care. “You take them off in the ring, you forfeit. The match doesn’t end until you have every single chain the opposing team is wearing—whether they give them to you willingly or not. Any questions? Good. Find an empty spot and claim it. Someone will be by to let you know when you’re fighting.” She looked behind us. “Next.”

We shuffled past, walking until we found a free area of the tent. Most of our fellow combatants were human, making me think that the animals participating were being kept somewhere else. Not all of them would be as well-behaved as Garm.

“I particularly like how she asked if we had questions, but didn’t wait for us to ask any,” Grant said, dropping his bag to the grass.

I dropped mine next to his. “Edda, not that I’m complaining, but what’s an Ancile?”

She looked up at me, her eyes hooded. “Mars.”

Ah, yes. Now I remembered. Grant still looked confused, so I explained. “It’s Latin. There were twelve Ancilia—sacred shields of ancient Rome, but only one was a divine gift from the gods. The other eleven were to confuse thieves. They were kept in the Temple of Mars. Edda was being clever.”

He nodded. “Shields. I get it.”

Sometimes Valkyries are referred to as divine Shield-maidens, since many scholars think the “myth” of Valkyries stems from the lore of the Shield-maidens. Since we were incognito, Edda had picked something from a different set of myths than Norse. It was very likely no one would get it, but it would mean something to us. We were shields. “Very nicely done. If I had named us, we would have been Team Super Death Squad.”

“Oh sure,” Edda said, her tone dry. “Come up with cool names now.”

Grant unzipped his bag and started gearing up, Edda and I following suit. Garm laid down, his head on his paws, watching us get ready.

“Do you need anything, big guy?” The wolf dropped his head to his paws and stared at me, and I could somehow tell he was faintly amused that I’d asked. *Why would I need anything for battle*, he seemed to say, *when I am perfect as I am?*

I rolled my eyes. “Because even the wolf of wolves might want a bowl of water. Forget I asked.”

Dressing for battle was always interesting. I could fight in anything, sure. Once I even battled a wendigo naked, which I don’t recommend. I lost a lot of blood and got some really interesting frostbite. What you choose to wear—if you have time to garb yourself properly—depends on several factors. A lot of it comes down to two things in the end, though—which do you need more, protection or speed? Jeans, for example, give you more protection than leggings. They’re thicker and will protect your skin from road rash if you’re thrown. But they aren’t as flexible as leggings, which will do fuck-all to protect you, but they won’t get in the way of you doing a high kick to someone’s head.

Edda’s gear of choice today was thick leggings and the kind of shirt that you wear to the gym because it’s light, formfitting, and wicks sweat. Which means it would be difficult to grab ahold of her shirt to yank her around. Over that she layered a tactical vest, which was designed to be stab proof. It wouldn’t stop a bullet, but Edda was more likely to go up against claws, teeth, and blades in the arena. Edda also has these awesome sort of chainmail shorts. They’re lighter than they look; I’m not sure what they’re made of. They covered her from hip to just above the knee, helping to protect her femoral artery. Then of course she donned a good, broken in pair of steel toe boots.

I wore jeans, but they had some spandex in them, so they moved better than normal jeans. Same tactical vest and boots. Both of us had our spears in custom holsters on our back. They wouldn’t be visible to the crowd, but they were easy to reach. Edda quickly braided my hair for me, hiding a few fun little spikes in there in case anyone made a grab for it. After that, it’s just strapping on extra blades. I had short, flat-black throwing blades in a holster around my waist. In the same holster was a tactical blade. Edda had something similar, but without the throwing knives. She’s not as good with them. She also had a wicked looking custom-made tactical ax strapped to her back. I needed to ask her later where she bought it, because I wanted one for my birthday.

Next to us, Grant looked almost harmless. He wore a sleeveless shirt, broken in jeans, and boots. He strapped a blade to his thigh, and that was it. He wouldn’t get out his bow and arrow until we were ready to fight.

I helped Garm get his golden chain on. He didn’t look too impressed with it, but then, he didn’t look impressed by much. After that, a harried looking little man with a clipboard stopped by and gave us our fighting order. We would be part of the third bout, against Tooth & Claw. We weren’t told who—or what—we would be facing beyond that.

“If you make it past the first bout, you’ll get your pass for the next round tomorrow night.” The man squeaked the words in a high-pitched voice as he flipped through the pages on his clipboard making notes.

“Understood,” I said, jumping in before any of my team could ask questions. Even though I wanted to ask just as many as them. The problem remained that it was likely we were supposed to know this stuff. We would have to be sneaky, then. After the man disappeared, I ducked out the other exit of the tent and tried to get a peek at the arena.

The stands were filling with people, some more human than others, not that you could tell readily. I would be willing to bet that there were a lot of spectators wearing glamor spells like mine, though not as extensive. Loki may be a trickster, but his magic was top notch.

I couldn’t get to the stands from my exit. That part had been cordoned off with another wire fence. Around the back of the tent, I could see a handful of trailers and cages housing the creatures that were either less interested in fighting, or were so interested they couldn’t be trusted to wait until it was their turn. Not that I could see what was inside any of them. No one wanted to tip their hand and let the other teams know what they would be up against until they absolutely had to.

I followed the fence to the fighter entrance. There was a small area where we could stand and watch the fights if we wanted, and four other fighters were doing the same as me—checking out the fighting space. The fights were taking place where the old military guns used to be, which meant we weren’t working with a flat terrain. From where I was standing, there was a set of cement stairs that led to the fighting area. At the bottom of the stairs, cement curved in an arc around what looked like a little amphitheater that surrounded the circle of grass where the guns used to be. Graffiti painted the cement walls that surrounded the whole area, leading to the flat terrain above where the bleachers had been set. Edda had pulled up the maps of the park earlier, and from what I’d seen, the space shouldn’t have been so big. It was the size of a football field, at least. Someone was using magic to stretch the land until it was large enough to host not just the fights but the spectators. I had no idea how that was even done. If I survived today, I’d have to ask Tally if she knew.

The bleachers wrapped around the makeshift arena in a C-shape, the rest of the space left open so the spectators could see the ocean. At the end of the C farthest from me sat a specialty box. Two guards stood between the opening of the box and the walkway to the riffraff. The men weren’t big like the ones we’d already passed, but they looked fit and when they moved, I could tell they were used to their bodies. Not huge, but obviously good fighters, especially if they were guarding VIPs. In the box itself there were five chairs, but currently only two of them were occupied. The first man was built like a fencer—long, lean lines—with blond hair and pale skin. It was far enough away that I couldn’t see much more beyond that. As I watched he plucked a bottle out of an ice bucket, examined it, made some comment to his companion, before he put it back. He laughed when the other man said something. His friend was bigger, with wide shoulders and ink black hair against a sun-kissed face. I wasn’t sure if he was normally as pale as his friend, but he definitely went outside more.

The crowd grew suddenly noisy and I tore my eyes off of the men in the booth. The first round of fighters walked past me and entered the arena. Eight fighters went down the steps, separating into two groups once they were past the gate. The first group took the end of the arena under the VIP box. Their group had two women—one petite, and one who fit the title of Amazon. The other two consisted of a medium-sized man with a shaved head, and a giant brown bear. The bear was wearing a scarred chest-plate and a saddle.

The other team was closer to me so I could see them better. They had a minotaur, his bulky upper half bullish and wearing Grecian style battle armor, a large double-bladed axe in his hand. Next to him stood a beautiful olive-skinned woman wearing sunglasses and a brightly colored silk robe, her hair wrapped up in a turban. The robe bulked oddly, like she had something on her back, but I didn’t know what. She nonchalantly held the leash of a golden lion in one hand, the chain of the leash disappearing into his tawny mane. In the other, she held a tactical crossbow. A thin, smaller man rounded out their team. He didn’t appear to be holding any weapons, and he was sweating heavily. He did not look like a happy camper.

The crowd was shouting now, feet pounding on the bleachers around them. Add a few foam fingers and it could have been any normal sporting event, though some of the crowd looked distinctly moneyed, guessing by clothes and some of the jewelry I’d seen. I couldn’t see my dad from where I was standing, though I looked.

The crowd quieted as a voice came over the loudspeaker. “Let’s hear some noise for our first combatants of the evening, Battle Dirge!” The group under the VIP booth each raised one of their arms, except the bear. He roared. I guess it would look silly if the bear waved, and everyone was doing their best to appear tough, wearing their mean faces and all that.

When the crowd quieted, the announcer came back on. “And let’s hear it up for Death Rattle!” Death rattle also showed us their mean faces, except for the sweaty tiny man, and the lion, who obligingly roared.

I tuned out the booming voice welcoming the crowd, telling them helpful things like ‘don’t fall into the fighting pit’ and instead watched the two men in the VIP box. The dark haired one was leaning forward, intent on the upcoming match. The blond lounged in his chair, like he was about to watch a tennis match and not eight strangers ripping each other apart. The fighters fanned out on each end, stretching, loosening up their muscles. The little sweating man appeared to be praying, though I couldn’t understand what he was saying. The speaker was too loud, the crowd beginning to murmur again.

The sharp crack of a starter pistol split the air and the fighters moved, almost as one. Each side was a flurry of movement as the teams surged toward each other. On the end of team Battle Dirge, the Amazon swung into the bear’s saddle in one smooth motion, her sword drawn as they barreled forward. The guy with the shaved head was shifting, his skin rippling in a manner that made my gorge rise. He fell, but by the time he hit the sand, a tiger had taken his place. A shapeshifter, then. The petite woman hadn’t moved.

Meanwhile Death Rattle had also been in motion. The minotaur ran forward, his battle ax to the side. The lion had been let off its leash and was bounding toward the tiger. Although the little man stayed in his spot, his hands were moving frantically now, his lips forming words I couldn’t hear. A magic user of some sort. But it was the robed woman that caught my attention. She stepped forward, her gait unhurried, her hands almost languid as she dropped the robe. Underneath it she was wearing leather pants, a quiver, and nothing else. I finally saw what the robe had been hiding—a massive set of wings. Her hair wrap hit the sand a second before she leapt into the air, taking flight. Snakes. Her head was covered in snakes. Fuck me, team Death Rattle had a gorgon.

The gorgon flapped her wings, the feathers gray, with black-tipped ends, and soared above the fight. She held up her crossbow and let loose a bolt, which hit the ground an inch from the tiger. The tiger leapt to avoid it, but it left him off balance when the lion hit. The little man close to me raised his arms, his voice a crescendo, whatever spell he was building was about to be loosed. I never got to see what it was. At that moment, the petite woman on the other team opened her mouth and let out a note of pure beauty.

I’d heard that sound before and quickly clapped my hands over my ears. It wouldn’t totally block it out, but it would help. According to Plato, there’s no such thing as perfection in our earthly realm. Everything, from the gate I was leaning against, to the sword in the Amazon’s hands, was an imperfect object striving to be the perfect gate, the perfect sword, and falling short. The Siren’s song was as close to perfect beauty as humanity was ever going to hear, and it was a beauty that was so exquisite it hurt.

The little mage froze in place and the minotaur dropped his ax, forgotten, before falling to his knees. The lion laid down, ignoring the tiger clawing at it. Not that it was doing any good. The tiger’s claws weren’t gaining any purchase, making me think that the lion was Nemean. The gorgon in the sky faltered, dropping to the ground, as the Amazon rode forward on her bear and sliced off the mage’s head in one clear swing. The head rolled along the cement, bouncing against the wall. The Amazon dropped down and casually removed the necklace from around the stump of his neck as it poured out his life’s blood onto the cement. She wiped her hand on his shirt before pocketing his necklace.

And still the siren sang. She walked forward slowly, her song causing many in the audience to weep openly at the searing perfection of the notes. Gracefully she removed the chain from around the minotaur’s neck. Followed by the lion’s chain. Finally she stalked up to the gorgon. The gorgon was on her knees, her hands flat on the ground. She’d dropped her crossbow at some point when I wasn’t looking. The snakes writhed around, dancing to the wordless song of the siren. She eased the chain off the gorgon, and she held it up, a triumphant smile forming on her ruby lips.

The song cut off abruptly when her lips closed, the arena suddenly silent. Everything stayed frozen for a second, a hushed shock over the world.

Then the crowd erupted, standing to cheer for Battle Dirge. Everyone staring at the siren as she beamed in triumph.

But my eyes stayed on the gorgon. I barely caught the whip-fast movement of one of the snakes as it struck.

The siren gasped, the color draining from her face. She crumpled to the ground.

The crowd, once again, went deathly silent.

Death Rattle would have been disqualified since the battle was already over when the snake struck, but since they’d lost anyway, I suppose it didn’t matter.

Then over in the VIP lounge came the sharp bite of laughter. The blond was still lounging in his seat, holding his sides as he practically cackled.

The dark haired one leaned forward, amusement coloring his tones. “I suppose now would be a good time for a medic?” Though he didn’t seem to put any effort into it, his voice carried through the arena.

There was a flurry of motion off to the side as a team of medics, clearly marked in red scrubs, argued amongst themselves. Clearly no one wanted to go out onto the battlefield as long as the gorgon was still out there. They argued for a minute before a woman pushed them aside, her long stride taking her out to the siren.

I wanted to tell her not to bother. Gorgon venom wasn’t poisonous, but it did produce a death-like coma. On a biological level, Sirens were essentially human. She would live, but she wouldn’t regain consciousness for three days. Either way, she was out of the bout.

The combatants left the field, none of them stopping to pick up the body of the dead magic-user. I wouldn’t let myself picture any of my friends in his place. Instead I turned around and headed back to the tent.

We had a bout to prepare for.