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books



BLOODGUARD

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CHAPTER

1

LEITH

The battered wagon wheels rumble over one pothole, then the next, rattling the bars of our cage and scraping the rough metal along the cut in my shoulder. I tighten my jaw in an effort not to wince. It won't do me good to remind any of the nine fighters locked in here with me that I'm injured.

Instead, I keep my gaze fixed on the dried blood still on my hands from my last match. The blood isn't mine. It's Yular's, I think. Or maybe Mundag's. Both trolls were thrown into the arena with me yesterday, and, like the rest of us, they chose to fight to the death to feed their families.

They just weren't as brutal as me. Nor were they as desperate.

Crossing my arms over the thin leather armor covering my bare chest, I lift my chin and stare at the scarred face of the fighter across from me. Two bottom tusks rise over the ogre's upper lip, the left one jagged and broken next to a gash that stretches from his mouth to his ear. His eyes catch on mine—then harden, letting me know he still has some fight left in him. I openly stare back, letting him know I'm *all* fight.

The sound of a horn announces our arrival, and the ogre huffs and looks away. No sense kicking things up in here when we might not even get paired today.

I can't help the slight sinking feeling in my gut as the horn's final note fades on the wind, reminding me there's a real chance I won't ever hear that sound again. The arena is unpredictable as fuck.

The wagon slows when it reaches the outer wall surrounding the coliseum complex, and heavy chains clank as the massive wooden gate swings open with a splintering groan.

Every foot the gate widens, chants of "Bloodguard!" from the arena build in volume like a brewing storm, rolling through the wagon.

Sullivan, the veteran fighter beside me, spits on the floor. "Filthy wretches," he mutters.

I toss him a raised brow—he nearly spat on my boot—but he just grins.

Like me, he's human. Unlike me, his skin is lighter and his hair is the color of faded straw. My skin is rich brown from all the time spent outside training, and my hair is black as tar—but both are just as dirty as Sullivan. His scraggly beard may be longer than mine, but it only barely covers the boils thickening his throat above his armor.

Sullivan is a tough old fighter. Slightly taller than my six feet and with more bulk, his size makes up for the twenty years between us. That doesn't make him better, though. It just makes him someone to watch.

"I want to be a swordsmith," he once told me. "Spend my life making weapons I'll never need again." His blue eyes had shifted to mine. "What about you, boy?"

"Me?" I'd asked. "I'll be the one you make weapons for."

Three years later and I'm thinking he had the right of it.

I glance at his forearm, where a sword and thorny vine have been tattooed, each for his two previous victories. For the next two victories he wins, he'll get a rose and a crown—and finally his freedom again. Lucky bastard.

I shift my weight on the hard bench as the chants get faster and faster. "*Bloodguard! BLOODGUARD!*"

A young gladiator, his muscles obviously bigger than his brains, seems enlivened by the crowd's excitement and raises a fist above his cloud of dark curls, barking out a quote from the recruitment pamphlet that lured most of us to this shit life. "Fight for the gold, *win* for the glory!"

"Glory never did the dead much good," I grumble.

“At least they fed us today.” Sullivan coughs and then spits again. He’s been sick for weeks and struggling to hide it. Weakness is the first thing that will get you killed around here. Stupidity runs a close second.

The wizard on the bench across from us clearly doesn’t know that, though. He frowns at Sullivan, the sour expression the only thing marring the man’s smooth, white face.

“What’s wrong? Does my spit disgust you?” Sullivan asks, smiling. “Get over it. You’re just as screwed as I am.”

Sparks of magic light the wizard’s dark eyes. “*You* disgust me.”

“Why?” Sullivan challenges. “We can’t all be fancy little lords like yourself.”

The wizard lunges, and I ram my heel into his chest and kick him back into his seat.

“Save it for the arena,” I warn.

The wizard gapes at me. He likely didn’t expect my strength or speed. Most don’t, which is why I’ve survived this long.

Sullivan nudges me. “Damn shame he needs his staff to control all that magic, ain’t it, Leith?” His smile gathers more of an edge. “Too bad he shattered it during his last fight.”

Cracking it over an ogre’s skull, if memory serves. It’s what secured him the win and a spot among the ten of us here.

My glare keeps the wizard in place, which is not a hard thing to do. All the rage and bitterness pulsing through my veins is surely reflected in my features. *His* features reflect only terror of the upcoming match now.

He doesn’t stand a chance without his staff, and he knows it.

The rules allow us to use anything we can reach within the arena once the match starts. But even if a staff lies among the pile of swords, shields, and daggers we’re offered, the wizard won’t have the time to bind his power to it. He’s starved and weak. We all are.

“I—I have a family,” he stammers as I continue to glare. “A wife and children who need me.”

Wizards, like elves and other beings with magic, have trouble conceiving, so he likely has no children and is playing for sympathy. He won’t find any here.

Sullivan laughs, as do the other gladiators, and angry tears cut lines into the wizard’s dirty face.

Figures. Those who are scared always cry.

I don't laugh or sympathize. We all have loved ones. It doesn't make him special.

My chest tightens just thinking of my little sister, her body ravaged by illness and not enough coin for a proper healer, but I quickly shake off the useless emotion. She doesn't need my sympathy right now. She needs me to focus—and fucking win.

The cheering builds as we rumble closer to the main structure. I try to let it galvanize me, but after years of this shit, it's hard to see the joy of either gold or glory in the fight to come.

The promise of housing, food, and money to send home lured me, just the same as all the other gladiators in this cage, to the wealthier kingdom of Arrow. And at first, this really was a land that surpassed my dreams.

But only a month after I arrived, an assassination attempt on the queen left her in a coma, and in a blink, gone were the games intended to “train” the finest warriors in Old Erth. Gone were the days of hearty meals and opportunities to heal and rest. And gone were the cheers for besting a competitor without a death blow.

Decrepit and filthy conditions claim most of us now. The arena claims the rest. Those left standing are rewarded with fairy elm soup that never quite satiates our hunger and a pittance per win. But...even a pittance helps our families, and cold broth is still food.

Eyes on the prize, I remind myself.

I blink up at the coliseum as it finally becomes visible from my spot in the corner of the wagon. A showy display of elven architecture, the stadium is made of glittering stone. Archways mark several spectator entrances, each one with a statue of a different Bloodguard—the name originally coined for the first eight generals in Arrow's army—standing guard at the top. The main entrance boasts the largest statue of all: a phoenix, the symbol of this empire.

“You can almost taste victory, eh?” Sullivan's words echo my thoughts, but there's a bleakness in his gaze. We're both so close—and yet it's hard to hold on to something as useless as hope in a place like this.

Still, he only has two matches left. Four for me. Four more out of what felt like an insurmountable hundred, and I'll win the title of Bloodguard. I'll be a citizen of Arrow. I'll be rich. And I will have everything I'll ever

need—and so will my family.

The tall, broad-chested moon horses hesitate as we reach the tunnel that stretches under the coliseum and widens into underground stables and staging areas, but a crack of the whip has them moving again. The steeds cast a faint glow like the moon, hence their name. Their front legs are extra-long and their haunches wide, giving them added strength to pull our heavy wagon.

Moments later, we're inside the tunnel. The shade is a welcome reprieve from the suffocating heat, but there's little time to enjoy it before the humid stench of horse manure and death steals my breath.

"Fuck me, that's awful," Sullivan mutters, reaching up to pinch his nose. I don't bother.

Eventually, the horses pull the wagon back up and out on the other side of the stands and onto the main coliseum floor, but they hesitate again, as though they can taste the scent of blood permeating the sand.

"It's been said that the sand cloaking the arena floor was once as white as the snow on the mountains of Amdar," the young fighter says with awe. New Guy must've *memorized* the damn recruiting pamphlet.

As a group, we eye the arena floor. After the last three years of brutality, only a field of sickly gray remains.

The carriage driver curses and snaps his whip at the steeds again, and they trudge forward, jerking us backward in our cage. This time, I can't hide my grimace.

"What do you think they'll throw at me this time?" Sullivan asks, absently scratching under his breastplate.

"Maybe a pair of fire elks?" a dwarf with a septum ring and a thick gray braid suggests, rubbing her hands along her thighs. "Those bastards from Canvol will burn through you if they don't eat you first."

"It could be anything," I answer truthfully, my tone bored.

Usually, we're paired to fight each other one-on-one, but sometimes they like to throw in a few beasts to keep things interesting. And although not a rule, everyone knows the closer a fighter gets to winning Bloodguard, the more shit they give you to try to take you out.

I pull in a deep breath and try not to focus on the fact that only *two* have made it to Bloodguard since I arrived and the High Lord took over Arrow.

“Whoever or whatever it is,” Sullivan says, leaning back against the bars like he hasn’t a care in the world. “I’ll try to make it quick so the rest of you can see how fast I kill and conquer.”

I almost crack a smile at his cockiness, but then the air thickens in the wagon as we begin to circle the arena.

“Bloodguard! *Bloodguard!*”

I work my jaw from side to side, trying to relieve the tension pulling the cords along my throat. By all of Old Erth, I will never get used to the entirety of this warzone. In this colossal space, we are insignificant. Specks of dust along an illustrious painting. Mere saplings in a forest of gargantuan trees.

Like always, I try to pretend the size doesn’t matter. Like always, I know it does. Plenty of space to run. Nowhere to hide.

I sit back, grunting a curse at everyone who couldn’t wait to arrive. The stands are full today—with spectators garbed in clothes of every color instead of the black we’d grown accustomed to over the past month. My stomach sinks like a stone.

“Well, shit,” Sullivan says.

“Guess the period of mourning is over,” the dwarf mutters into the heavy silence, her voice pitching low as she stares at her boots.

No one speaks as we each contemplate what this will mean for our upcoming matches. The High Lord’s been tempering his thirst for blood out of respect for the queen’s death this last month after her nearly three-year coma. Bets have been down as well—no one wanted to seem disrespectful while the kingdom mourned the loss of their beloved monarch.

I take a deep breath and concentrate on slowing my racing heart. Panic will only get me killed faster. Because today—today, the High Lord will most likely try to gain back that loss in revenue by making a spectacle out of our lives. And our deaths.

No one is safe today.

No one.



CHAPTER

2

LEITH

Focusing on the upcoming match, I tighten the bloodied bandage over my left hand with my teeth, glancing up at the people we pass.

The wealth among the crowd becomes less pervasive the higher the stands stretch above the stone arena. The Commons, the largest ring of rows at the top, is a sea of functional clothing stitched of simple cotton, whereas the center ring, the Middling, boasts robes of silk. But even that apparel seems mere scraps when compared to what the inner Noble Ring flaunts. Clothing of the finest silks and crinoline, flashing gemstones and gold, turns those seats practically into a treasure chest.

Eight sets of wide stairs are evenly spaced around the coliseum, and bet takers wearing bright-yellow tunics run up and down the rings, collecting wagers in exchange for tickets. And now that the crowd's got a look at us wheeling into the arena, the antes are stacking up. Banners for each fighter, our pictures painted on them but no names, unfurl above the highest ring, flag after flag stretching all the way around the arena.

I can't help but scan past each banner until I see Sullivan's familiar face—and the odds being adjusted against him—and my skin tightens. *Shit*. Since Sully only has two more matches before achieving Bloodguard, the pot is especially high—and the odds show him as a favorite.

Fortunes will be made today. And lost.

Sullivan follows my line of sight and growls low in his chest. “Fuckers.”

Normally, we’d be happy for the favorable spread, hoping to make a few extra coins ourselves when we win. But not today. With odds like that, the House only wins if Sully falls. And I suspect High Lord Vitor has something extra special in mind for us now.

Everything in Arrow is crooked—and the High Lord and his son most of all.

At last, the moon horses whinny as they’re pulled to a stop in front of the Regent of Arrow’s personal box with four rows starting eight feet above the arena floor. Close enough that the royals can soak in the blood and violence but still at a safe distance. Their box, too, is decorated with the image of the phoenix, regal and red with swirling orange feathers. No one has seen the actual bird since it was killed a century ago, but the damn thing is painted on everything the aristocracy touches.

To hear the stories, they waited decades for the mythical bird to rise again after claiming victory over Arrow’s enemies and dying in the final battle.

But it never did.

Seems absurd to continue to idolize the creature, but then again, I find most of the things these royals do to be frivolous.

The rusty wagon door is yanked open by a guard, and one by one we spill out and stand in two rows, the crowd gleefully tittering before us.

I roll my shoulders and stare up at the royal box seats.

Sadists. All of them. “I should set that box on fire.”

Sullivan’s laugh turns into a cough. “Aw, come on, boy. At least your fans are here.” He points to a section in the Middling to our right, where a cluster of spectators waves bright scarves with my assigned banner colors—red and purple—but I pay them no mind and turn back to the royal box.

The next few minutes will decide if I have a chance to live—or die.

The High Lord’s bet maker, a short human with round spectacles on the tip of his nose and a scarcity of white hair fluffed out over his ears, glances at each of us and then weighs our fates on his ledger.

With a flourish, he hands the parchment to High Lord Vitor, the ruling Regent of Arrow, who is sitting in the first row, as his status demands. The

High Lord glances down at the sheet, his thick, dark hair gathered in a wide braid that starts on the top of his head and snakes down his back, a sharp contrast against the pale skin of his pointed ears. He looks no more than forty years old, but elves tend to live hundreds of years, so there's no telling how old he really is. He's wearing the traditional elven garb of flowing silk pants and vest—in gold silk, of course—but something tells me it's to showcase his rather un-elvishly muscular frame than anything else.

Everything this man does screams intentional.

The High Lord turns to his son next to him, and they stare at each other for a beat. No words are spoken, but it's clear there's a battle brewing between the two men before the High Lord gives a quick nod of his head and turns back to the bet maker. He says something to the short man and shoves the ledger at him. The bet maker's white brows reach into his hairline as he takes the parchment, but then he makes a few sweeping lines with his quill and begins to scribble again.

Something in the High Lord's tight jaw has the hairs on the back of my neck lifting.

He turns left and snaps something I can't quite hear at his son. General Soro, who looks like a watered-down version of his father, is playing dress-up today in full military regalia, a slew of round, gold medals shaped like buttons decorating both sides of his structured navy tunic. Of course, the "general" has never served a day in the military, the title being self-proclaimed and as worthless as the man.

Father and son exchange sharp words—clearly no love lost there—before the High Lord's attention shifts to his bet maker again, his son clearly dismissed from his thoughts. Soro's jaw tightens, and his gaze catches mine, a cruel twist edging up one corner of his mouth as though he can't wait to cheer on my death in particular.

Sullivan nudges me, pulling my attention from the royal box, and I drop my hand. He motions with his head at the other gladiators in line with us and murmurs, "I have a good feeling about whoever they pair me with today."

Apparently, he's missed the exchange between Vitor and his son and instead spent his time sizing up the other competitors. The dwarf woman is thick-limbed, tough-skinned, and strong, but they tend to lack speed.

The others aren't as ruthless, not like Sullivan and me. He's right. We *should* make it through to the next round. Even as sick as he is, he's stubborn and lethal. He's also the only gladiator I dare call a friend.

Since we first met, we've shared an unspoken pledge not to turn on each other unless we're pitted against one another in a match. So far, that hasn't happened. Likely because of the coin lost to the House if the wrong one of us were to win. But I know the day is coming when the betting outweighs the risk. I just hope it's not today.

As I glance around at the other gladiators, I can't help but hope *any* of them die on my blade today instead of Sully.

A giant bell clangs, signaling a call for last bets and time for us to get back into the wagon, head to the stables, and await our paired matches.

"You ready, Leith?" Sullivan asks.

Ready to die? Or ready to kill? I nod regardless.

The dwarf stands tall, roaring and beating her chest, while a couple of elves from my homeland wave to the crowd, their thin, elegant arms swaying like reeds in the breeze. I need to keep my eyes on them. Elves are deceptively strong. The newer competitors, a minotaur and a wolverine shifter, join them and bulge their muscles. They're all trying to persuade the crowd to bet more, thinking they'll earn more that way.

Good luck with that.

Most rewards for fighters died right around the same time they started adding convicted criminals to the competitor lists.

Sullivan and I don't pander to the crowd. He cracks his neck from side to side. I stretch out my hands. The stab wound through my left palm burns, and so does the axe injury across my left shoulder blade.

I feel Soro's interest return, and I look up, expecting a glare for daring to watch his father dismiss him. Instead, he holds my gaze assessingly as a young human lord beside him laughs at something he said. I don't recall seeing this lord before, his green hair spiked with colorful jewels on the tips like some fluffed-up peacock, but it's clear he is thrilled to be in the royal box today and coveting Soro's attention. He gestures to the two lines of fighters below him, and the pair shares another laugh, making me consider my idea to set the box on fire again.

To Lord Peacock's left is an empty seat and then two more lords, one who's older with gray hair and dark-brown skin and one around my

age with long, black braids, the sides of his head shaved close—a style favored by the military here. They're not cheering or laughing like the others. They're not even rushing to place bets. Why?

Suddenly, all four men's heads swivel to watch an elegant elf with light-brown skin and high cheekbones make her way toward them.

She's tall and generously curved, her strides as smooth as water as she walks along the first row and enters the royal box. If it wasn't for the way she carries herself, I'd mistake her for a member of the Middling. A plain black hooded cape is draped over her shoulders atop a well-made blue dress, tastelessly unadorned by royal standards.

As she sits gracefully in the empty seat beside Lord Peacock, the older elf to her left reaches out, capturing her in a warm embrace. As she settles, she removes her hood and shoves her wavy brown hair behind one pointed ear. This woman is poised, regal, and...scarred.

Small, raised burn marks start directly below her jawline, thickening and branching out as they slope down her throat. My guess is there's more damage along her chest, but the way she clutches her cloak against her body makes it too hard to tell.

Elves are long-lived and heal at a rapid pace. I've *never* seen one's skin marred so severely.

Lord Peacock shakes his head, openly chastising her as he lifts her hood back over her hair and attempts to further shield her scars. She removes her hood again, glaring at him, but says nothing.

Soro leans around Lord Peacock to say something to her, and the elf grits her jaw and crosses her arms, as if it's taking everything she has not to pummel both of them. A satisfied smirk turns up a corner of Soro's mouth, whatever barb he intended obviously hitting its mark, and he leans back in his seat.

I watch as she carefully smooths her cotton gown over her knees, her focus just above our heads as though she doesn't want to make eye contact with those beneath her station. Fuck that. I straighten to my full height, my fists clenching and eyes narrowing on hers, demanding she see *me*.

Like she can hear my thoughts, her head tilts lower, and our gazes collide.

Her eyes are fixed on mine now, and neither of us moves. We don't

need to. The earth is moving beneath our feet *for* us.

She's no more than twelve feet away, only a few feet above me, so close I almost think I could touch her, and yet—she might as well be in another kingdom. As I continue to stare, a soft pink highlights her cheeks. But she doesn't look away, even when I raise one eyebrow in return. An emotion I haven't seen in so long I'm almost not sure I'm seeing it now flits across her delicate features. For a moment, barely a fairy's breath, I'm not a weapon or a face soon to be forgotten. I'm just a man.

Damn. I haven't felt this human in years...until she lifts her chin up and away, as though I've been dismissed. And I'm slammed back into my hellish reality.

I should know better than to assume or desire respect from one of these assholes. I thought she was giving me something—something I've gone too long without—and hell if she didn't take it all away with a simple gesture to remind me of my place.

Lord Peacock pivots his scowl from her to me. I ignore him, anger churning its way up my chest, and spread my arms, calling out to the woman, "What's wrong, princess? Feeling a little dirty that you like what you see?"

She jerks her attention to her left, away from Lord Peacock, and pretends she wasn't just eye-fucking me a minute ago. Her companion deepens his scowl at me.

"You think you can beat me?" I challenge him, my knuckles cracking as I widen my stance. "Step inside and let's go, asshole!"

"What the hell you doing, boy?" Sullivan asks low, but I don't bother responding. The truth is, I have no fucking clue what's gotten into me.

Lord Peacock leaps up, reaching for the hilt of his sword. She stands, too, pulling at his arm and speaking fast. The lord shakes her off and moves forward, his foot on the low stone ledge, appearing ready to take me on.

Nobles can challenge anyone who offends them, even a gladiator. But if that noble does so within the confines of the arena, they agree to fight to the death, just like us.

"Filip, Filip—don't do this," she begs louder. "*Please*. I need you!"

To buy her statelier dresses, no doubt.

The commotion draws the attention of High Lord Vitor, who looks

like he's about to step in when his shit-for-brains son leans forward, a cruel smile dancing in his eyes, and says something to the young lord I can't quite make out. Lord Peacock tightens his jaw and steps fully onto the stone ledge.

"You'll pay for that disrespect, you filthy dog," he shouts back at me, his shoulders tensing.

The two lords beside the brown-haired woman hurry forward, but they aren't fast enough.

Lord Peacock leaps into the arena, his sword arm raised and his anger directed right at me. He swings, and I sidestep before catching him with a right hook. My punch isn't enough to knock him out, but it *is* enough to stun him into dropping his sword. It's in my hand, and I'm swinging just as he rights himself.

The steel is of the finest quality I've seen in years, the edge so sharp I barely feel more than a bump as I slice clean through his spine.