

The Reaper's Game

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Footsteps echoed throughout the cool alleyway. I was alone in the shade, escaping the scalding sun's rays. To my left, I could see beyond the entrance. Crowds of commoners filled the streets, walking through the market. I looked down into my hands to see my silver helmet. I made sure my orange hair was in a tight bun before putting on my helmet, not wanting any of it to fall out of place or reveal my true identity. To my right, there was a broken mirror lying against the wall. I stood in front of it to see my reflection staring back in multiple places. The first thing I noticed was my helmet.

It resembled an upside down silver bowl with a metal fin starting at my forehead and trailing to the back, stopping at the base. Small spikes gave the smooth helmet texture, and the front covered everything but my jaw and eyes. I was always told as a child that my eyes could compete with the god of the sea. They were as blue as a cloudless sky. Moving down from my head, I saw my figure. I knew I wasn't fat, but the chest piece I wore covered everything above my waist. I was able to see my arms. In my opinion, they were quiet defined. Looking down, I saw my flowing skirt that stopped mid-thigh and had slits on the sides, revealing my slender legs. My skin was noticeably smooth and sun-kissed, thanks to all of the days I worked the field on my family's farm. Finally I saw my sandals, which were very basic and were tied extra tight.

I stared back at myself, mentally recapping what I was about to do.

A few weeks ago, a storm ran through the valleys of Italy. Unfortunately, one of those valleys happened to be what I call home, or what I used to call home. It was a strong one, the strongest I had ever seen. It lasted over a week. It went through my family's farm and demolished every piece of land we had. The winds tore up our farmhouse and the flooding destroyed our fields. My parents and siblings are doing the best they can to recover what is left, but after the summer's over, our big family of 19 are going to be in a bigger hole than we are now during the winter months. So, I decided to take the burden on my own shoulders. Before the sun was even awake I was already on the road, traveling on foot, to the city of Rome. All for the chance to win this month's competition and take home the hefty prize money that could potentially save my family.

Turning from the shattered mirror, I walked out into the blinding sun. The second I left the blanket of shade I could feel the sun hitting my armor, instantly raising its temperature. If it wasn't

for the clothes I was wearing underneath it acting as a protective barrier, I would've have been burnt to a crisp in a matter of minutes. The benefit of wearing hot metal in the middle of summer is that people do not want to bump into you, so the crowds were not an issue to get through. After my eyes adjusted to the light, I made a beeline to my destination. The highlight of Rome itself.

The Colosseum.

I finally stopped in front of the main entrance. My eyes crawled up the side of the beautiful building, taking in every detail carved into the stone.

It seemed to sparkle as the morning sun glistened off of it. The white marble gave it a glittery effect. Although cracks showed off the concrete base that kept the massive amphitheater standing tall. Huge arches were built into the walls, three rows stacked above one another. The bottom row allowing passage while the top two allowed light and air flow.

I looked to the right to see a flyer hanging by a nail. I walked closer to see what it said. "Come One. Come All. Watch the best beat up the rest." Drawings of muscular men dressed in barely any armor covered what the words didn't.

It was quite obvious that women were not welcome in the arena. It wasn't necessarily against the rules for a woman to enter, but it wasn't exactly promoted either. The issue was that we would not get treated seriously. And the moment a woman steps foot in the arena, she would either be targeted first, due to men seeing us as inferior, or we would be called a "distraction. You see, the only place women are allowed is the very top floor of the colosseum because the men wouldn't have a fair shot of fighting since they would be preoccupied on a woman's chest. However, with this disguise, I would be able to get a fair chance. And maybe even win.

I walked past the flyer and into the colosseum. There was a long table a few yards in front of me. Five people were sitting down with a stack of paper and a pen next to them. A line had formed in front of each one. Five lines with about ten people in each. Not to mention that each and every one of the people in those lines are all men. I got in line, somewhat intimidated, but I just shook it off and waited a good 5 minutes before taking the pen and dipping it in the ink.

I knew what I was doing was risky, like life or death risky, but what else was I going to do with my life. With that being my last rational thought, I started to sign the paper. I stalled a little, trying to think of a name to cover up the present one. I then start to here loud, exaggerated sighs coming from behind me basically signalling that I was taking to long and rushed me into writing the first name that popped into my head, Torva.

Before I could change it, I was pushed to the side and given a sheet of paper with my “name” on it. There was a string attached to the top corners so that I could wear it like a necklace.

It wasn't a bad name, so I decided it would just have to do. As I put the string around my neck, I knew there was no turning back. I took a deep breath before walking further into the shadows.

One step in, and my face instantly scrunches up from the strong smell of blood. I wondered if they ever cleaned the place because it sure didn't smell like it.

I had no idea where I was going, but decided to follow my competitors since they seemed to have a sense of direction. There was a stairway that led underground, the steps went in a spiral path and the moment I made the first turn, I was almost immediately engulfed in the blackest black I had ever seen.

After a few more turns, my eyes slowly began to adjust to the blackness. Soon I was in a huge circular room that was directly below the colosseum. Torches ran along the concrete walls, making the room quite warm since there were no windows. Or maybe the heat came from the amount of body heat coming from all of the men breathing as heavily as they could. The room was stuffed. There were small openings in the crowd, but no matter where you went, you would always have to brush arms with someone.

I saw a sign with red letters reading “WEAPONS” to my left and headed in that direction. I kept my head low, my eyes not meeting anyone else's.

The weapon stand had shields laid against the wall. Nets, swords, and tridents were in barrels. Multitudes of different kinds of helmets in all sorts of colors and shapes were hung up on

the wall. Each one covered in their own personalized blood stains, making me feel a lot better about having my own.

I decided to go for a basic approach with a gladius and shield. The person working the stand looked my age, around 18. He was scrawny, clearly not made for fighting. I asked for the lightest shield and sharpest sword, using my pleases and thank yous. The guy's stone cold stare faltered a little, clearly not used to people using their manners. I noticed his gaze soften the slightest bit as he turned around to fetch my request. In less than a minute, he returned with a shield that was able to reflect even the slightest detail of its surroundings. Not a drop of blood has touched its surface, this shield looked like it was made for the gods. It was silver with the brilliant design of swirls along the edge. It was noticeably different from the other shields too because the edges seemed to curl slightly, giving the holder extra coverage. He handed it to me and I almost lost my balance. It was so light, it was just like holding a pillow. It was a good size too. The bottom of it stopped right below my knee, the top stopping right under my chin, and its width covered to my shoulders. I looked back at him to receive my gladius. I saw the one he had retrieved for me and was taken aback by its beauty. It went perfectly with the shield, untouched and absolutely stunning.

I thanked him again before embarking back into the crowd. I had some time to spare so I decided to find where exactly we would be entering the fighting grounds.

I saw small archways all along the wall, with a wooden door at each one. I didn't see any names on them so I went over to the one on my right and opened it. Within was a short narrow hallway with a platform. Ropes were attached from the corners to the opening in the ceiling. I was smart enough to realise that this was one of the many trap doors the colosseum hid within itself. Rather than socializing with all the weird men out in the open room, I decided to sit down on the platform. Waiting, almost like a dog for my time to come.

The platform slowly began to slide up the wall, then stopped abruptly. I sat up and realized I must have dozed off. Rubbing my eyes, I looked around. I was now in a tiny room with a wooden door directly in front of me. The only source of light came from the crack underneath the door. I nearly jumped out of my own skin when a large bang sounded at my door and loud footsteps walked away. I walked over to the door, put my ear up against it, and listened.

“Gentlemen! Welcome to the annual Blood Brawl.” This was followed by loud deep rumbles and cheers from all of the men getting anxious to fight. “As usual, our Blood Brawl is a one day

event. There will be 3 rounds. For round one, the clock will be running and you will have exactly one hour to take out as many competitors as possible. Whoever remains from that round will continue onto the next round, where they will fight till only one remains. The victor will then go to Round 3, where they will have a battle to the death with the 9 time champion, Lazarus.”

The crowd cheered and clapped when the speaker began to talk about the huge prize money awaiting the champion, and proceeded to emphasize how this competition has absolutely no rules.

It's kill or be killed. Period.

Round 1

The horn goes off, signaling that the first round has begun.

Here we go. I start to count down the hour in my head and mentally prepare myself for what's about to begin. With my helmet securely on, and my weapons ready, I stay back at first and keep in the shadows. I start scoping out my competition and try to pick out the weak ones so I can save my energy for the bigger guys in the next round.

50 minutes. . .

I notice another man hiding in the corners, and I lock eyes with him, getting ready to pounce. I start to creep up on him and catch him off guard, making it an easy kill. I took a step forward and slashed off his shoulder, the popping of his joints could be heard all the way in the stands. I muffled his screams with my hand so no one else figures out where I am. I then slide off the front of my helmet to where only he can see my face. With him being distracted by my femininity, I plunged my gladius into his chest, I listen as he begins choking on his own blood, followed by an excited roar of the crowd.

36 minutes. . .

Satisfied with my work, I covered my face back up, and left him there to bleed out. For the majority of the round I tried to stay as hidden as possible, popping out here and there to get a few kills under my belt. My strategy was to let the others do the work for me because the more they fought, the more exhaustion began to take over.

15 minutes. . .

I've killed about 15 or 16 people and I'm honestly pretty proud of myself. Next thing I know, I am being put into a choke hold and I can feel the life literally being choked out of me. There is no way I am going to let this coward take this opportunity away from me when there are 15 minutes left in this round. I will not stand for it.

I fling myself forward, taking him with me. In the process, his arm gets slashed by my helmet causing him to scream out in pain. As he is doing this I shove my gladius up the roof of his mouth to hit my target. The brain. I watch as his body goes limp and he chest stops moving.

****Horn****

Round one is over and there are about 20 people left in the game. Over half of the competitors eliminated in just one hour. I had a feeling that this next round wouldn't last nearly as long.

We all head back down to the underground tunnels and wait for the next round to begin. As I am waiting, I overhear a group of guys talking. The big hairy one, who probably uses his hair as armor due to the amount of it on his body, starts the conversation.

"Hey did you see that guy out there? I think his name is like Torka or something."

"It's Torva, and yeah, I know. He is definitely one to look out for in this next round." says another guy. As I am hearing this the sides of my mouth begin to creep up and form a smile. I start getting excited because these guys are actually intimidated by me. *A girl*. I then hear another guy speak.

"Guys he literally killed like half of the total dead."

"He's like a damn reaper. I've never seen anyone like that here" replied another.

The reaper. I like that. It has a nice ring to it. I couldn't wait to tell all of this to my little brothers when I got home. My smile grew even more as I continues to eavesdrop on their conversation, having it amp me up before the next round starts.

Round 2

This time when the horn goes off, my adrenaline is through the roof and I am ready to win this round. I go out there and give no mercy whatsoever.

They had spread the awning over the colosseum during the break, making it a few degrees cooler than earlier. The new addition of shade gave my body the boost it needed.

I was ruthless. With my family's well-being in my head, I just went crazy.

As I am running through the stadium I am dodging everyone's blows at me until I reach the middle. For the first time in a long time, I felt free and untouchable. Hearing the crowd cheer my "name" only gets me more fired up. I now stand in the middle of the whole arena, waiting for my competitors to come to me.

At first they only come one at a time, easy. I pick them out one by one with no problem. Dead. Then they start to come in pairs, groups even, but I am not letting that stop me. One by one I knock them all to the ground. All that surrounds me are piles of dead bodies too heavy for me to move. As I look up you can just see the happiness oozing from the spectators as they watch people fighting to the death for their own amusement.

I thought that I had got everyone so I start to step over the dead bodies and start making my way over to the edge of the ring. I suddenly feel a sharp pain in the back of my shoulder and then the crowd goes absolutely wild.

I turn around and direct my gaze to the pain shooting through my arm. A knife. I quickly pull it out of my shoulder and drop it onto the ground, seeing as the sand sticks to the blood covered knife.

I look up from my shoulder and to my surprise, in the middle of the ring, there is still one more man left to kill. I realize it was the hairy guy from earlier. His shoulders were rising and falling heavily and noticed large gashes scattered around his body. He was definitely not in his best shape. Under my helmet, I gave him an "are you serious?" face and decided to get this over with.

I start sprinting toward him with my shield in one hand and my gladius in the other. I am so close to winning that I can taste the victory on the tip of my tongue. With that in mind, I fling myself in the air, using the bodies as somewhat of a ramp and I wrap my legs around his head twisting them around and landing on my feet.

My final opponent lies lifeless next to me with his face turned as far around as an owl's. He reminded me of the bear rug that laid on the floor in my family's living room. The second he was

down the crowd flips out and starts cheering so loud and excited that the challenger of the champion has been found.

****Horn****

I was the last one standing.

It was announced that there would be a two hour break period before the final round, so I went back to the room where I first came out of and went back down to the holding room.

It was weird being the only one there. The only noise came from the spectators above, all of them waiting with anticipation. I saw there was a group of servants, five girls to be specific, rushing towards me. They told me that they were assigned to me.

Before I knew it, I was sitting comfortably in a cushioned chair. I answered all their questions as I relaxed and they did their tasks. One was cleaning my weapons, one was keeping my cup and food dish full, another was writing down my answers to the questions for the paper, while the last two were massaging my hands and feet.

It was like heaven. I felt like a queen. But like all good things in life, they don't last. Just like that the two hours were up and I was thanking the girls for their help. I waved them off and walked back to the little room to enter the arena.

I walked into the sandy arena and noted that I was only one in there at the moment so I just waved at the crowd, earning some cheers and whistles. Above me, the awning had been taken away, allowing the setting sun's rays to filter through the colosseum adding a subtle orange tint to the stone. I saw my "name" painted on the wall next to the current best gladiator, Lazarus, whom I had never heard of before. The crowd started to get antsy and somewhat annoyed that the battle hadn't began yet.

Our fight was the main event.

The cheering erupted, the girls screaming on the top floor defended all the men combined. Turning around, I saw my competition strutting out of the shadows. My mouth dropped to the floor. The man that walked out of that door was *nothing* like I had pictured.

He was average height for a guy, only a few centimeters taller than me. Unlike my fallen competitors, this guy didn't have a single spec of facial hair in sight. He was well-groomed and

seemed to really care about his appearance. He carried a sword almost as sharp as his jawline. His hair went along with his face, cut short on the sides, fading to the top where his hair fluffed up a little. His eyes were green, a toxic green that even the brightest emeralds grew envious towards. Just looking at his face alone, I would dare to say that he could the gods to shame. Everytime he winked out into the crowd I could almost hear the girls swooning. I would have never imagined that this guy was a gladiator champion. He's seems more of a ladies man than a fighter, and his choice in clothing reflected that. He only wore armored shoulder pads and tight shorts. Not really leaving *anything* to the imagination. (^° 3 ^°)

I couldn't help but gawk over him. The way the sunset lit up his skin, he was like an angel sent from the gods. It would have been a disgrace to not look at him.

****Horn****

If it wasn't for the horn, I probably would've started drooling.

After taking a deep breath, I collected my thoughts and started looking at him as my competitor, and not like candy.

He carried a sword and shield, just like me. I watched as his eyes focused on me, looking up and down. The crowd grew quieter as we stood there, slowly circling, wondering who was going to make the first move.

After a couple minutes, he began to run towards me. He stayed low and right as he got to me, and he put his shield up. I followed suit and did the same. The moment the bang echoed around the colosseum I realized what he was doing. He was testing my strength. Clearly he has more brain than I originally assumed and it made sense now as to why he was a 9 time champion. He was just as equally brain as he was brawn, and it showed.

Pushing against his shield, he began to lose his footing on the sandy floor. He began to slide backwards, clearly miscalculating my strength. Jumping back a few feet, he started circling me. This time I made the first move. Lunging at him, I barely missed his shoulder as he dodged out of the way. I continued to swing my sword at him, getting the same result every time. We kept up the same act for a few more minutes and I could feel my arm beginning to grow weak. At the moment I was playing the hunter, but a small voice in my mind told me that the roles would soon be reversed.

I knew I should have started playing defensive but it was too late. Lazarus saw me stall and took the window. My reaction time could've been better, but I still was able to lift my shield in front of me. In seconds, he spun around my only defense and stabbed me right in my side. The side exposed to the blade, uncovered by my chest plate. I bit down on my cheek so hard that I started to taste the familiar coppery tang on the tip of my tongue. He must have noticed my weak spot in the beginning while he was staring me down. Luckily, it was just above my hip bone, right where my fat stored, so it didn't hit any major organs.

He was much quicker than me. I blame the fact that this guy has not only been eating luxurious meals every day, but he has also done nothing but train for these sort of events. Every time our swords clashed, sparks flared and the crowd grew more anxious.

****30 Minutes****

It feels like we've been going at it for days. We stood a few yards apart, both of us catching our breath. This has been the most work I have done all day, and I went through two rounds of fighting. Although I will say I am putting up quite the fight.

Other than the deep stab he gave me, I only had some cuts from his sword grazing my skin, and bruises from his fists. Mr. Perfect on the other hand made a bigger transformation. I returned the wound he gave me with a deep slice to his thigh and a gash right between his left shoulder and neck. If my arm hadn't weakened so quickly my aim would've been better and this fight would have been done already. I couldn't help but note that no matter how much blood and sweat this man wore, he only grew more and more attractive. It was a blessing and a curse.

Our breathing synchronized and our gazes met. I glared at him but instead of receiving one back, he just smiled. *SMILED?!* Did he not take me seriously?!

A new feeling began to spread through my veins. I could feel my body almost re-energize itself. This man dared to mock me. Clearly toying with me this whole time, not going for the kill when he had the chance. I was done with the whole game. It was time to make him regret letting me last this long.

A cheshire grin spread from ear to ear as I gripped my sword tighter. He looked at me oddly, and I was almost sure that a new look glazed over his emerald eyes. . .fear.

Like a streak of lightning, I ran at him. A new feeling fueled my muscles. Not a drop of exhaustion was in my blood. Lazarus clearly wasn't expecting this sudden change of events. I was raining attacks on him like there was no tomorrow. He has no choice but to play defensively.

The roles had been switched.

Bang after bang, my hits were gaining power after each strike. He knew it. I knew it. And more importantly, the crowd knew it. The cheering had stopped and everyone's eyes were glued to the fight. They could not believe that the leading champion, for almost a decade now, had met his match.

As I darted around and delivered blow after blow, my grin never vanished. Instead, it grew. The last rounds were exhilarating, yeah, but this round was something special. Even though I was trapped within these walls, fighting for my life, I had never felt so free. My sword flowed with my movements. I was starting to like this No Rules policy, because it allowed me to stop thinking and just do whatever my instincts told me to do.

My stone cold eyes locked with my competitor's and I noticed how his once bright eyes had become serious and slightly dull. He was running out of steam. I knew it was time to go for the kill.

I ran in a circle around him, jabbing my sword at him. His weapon meeting mine everytime. Without hesitation, I abruptly changed my direction and came at him head on. My shield meeting his with a bang. The vibrations threw him off and he stalled the slightest bit, now was my chance.

Within seconds my gladius was lodged deep into his chest. A yell of pain escaped his lips as his eyes squeezed shut. I had never heard such a manly scream in my short existence. My heart hurt to see such a fine man go to waste, but that guilt was short lived. I pulled out my weapon, blood spewed from the wound and dripped down his abs. His gasps for air soon turned into choking and he rolled over to see the sand covered in red. His choking echoed throughout the silent crowd. In one swift motion, I put my foot on his chest, driving my blade through his skull. It went deep enough to go penetrate the sand, ending his suffering all at once.

Out of respect for killing this god-like specimen, I laid his body in a formal matter. He was already on his back, so I laid his legs straight out and crossed his arms over his chest. I removed the blade from his head and closed his eyes.

I then stood up and faced the waiting crowd before me.

The spectators began to clap and cheer around me. I slowly turned in a circle, my eyes swept the colosseum. It was a full house, all 50,000+ seats were filled. Thousands chanting my name.

“Torva! Torva! Torva!”

My gaze settled on the emperor. He gave a slow clap, clearly satisfied with what he has just witnessed.

If I was honest I was not sure exactly what was going on around me. The sun and my adrenaline rush only made my head hurt worse. But I honestly could care less. I had just done what was deemed nearly impossible by the society I lived in. A woman had beaten more men in a day than any soldier could imagine. This new spark of confidence gave my body strength.

I decided that it was now or never.

A hush fell over the crowd as I lifted my hands onto my helmet. I could feel the blood stains, old and fresh, splattered on it. I paused before lifting it off my head. Reminiscing on everything that had just happened. As I slowly began to lift it off my head, my hair fell onto my shoulders. I dropped my helmet to the side and let all of the stares soak in for a bit. The young sunset gave my dark orange hair a velvety red look. Almost as if it was the same blood that smeared on my shield and blade.

It was silent in the colosseum, not one living thing dared to make a sound. They were in pure shock at who, or *what* was standing before them. A girl. No one could believe that a girl, a young one at that, could ever accomplish what most men only dream of.

After doing a good spin around the ring taking in everyone's faces whether they'd be covered in anger, disgust, shock, or even a hint of pride. It didn't matter. This only fueled the fire I had building up inside me. I then turned around and looked dead into the eyes of the emperor, whose burning glare I could feel the whole time.

“Who might you be?” he asked with what sounded like a hint of disgust.

I only had one thing to say and boy did I say it with pride.

“My name is Korin!” I yelled out to the whole stadium. “Your new Champion!”

The End