

Beyond the Arena

by
EA Robins

Arabeka limped across the arena to thunderous applause. Her name in the mouths of thousands, punctuated by the stomping of booted feet in the stands, sounded like a war drum.

Ari. Ari. Ari...

Though something had popped in her knee, and she was almost afraid to move her hand away from the wound across her exposed middle, Ari smiled. There was great benefit to being the crowd favorite. This night, she would bathe in slow-scented oils and drink honeyed wine imported from lush lands far beyond the deserts.

Before passing into the shadow of the fighter's tunnel, she turned and looked around at the faceless multitude. Slowly, she raised her hand in a fighter's salute. The audience erupted—screaming, whistling, and applauding their appreciation. She had bled for them. She had killed for them. She had thoroughly entertained them.

The darkness of the tunnel was a balm after her afternoon spent in the brilliant, baking sun. Her eyes adjusted slowly as hot sand gave way to cool stone, the floor firming beneath her bare feet. Before she reached the holding pit the fighters called the den, her injuries had begun to throb.

"Going to live, little one?"

Ari looked up, meeting the gaze of a heavily muscled woman almost twice her height. The half-giant wore thick leather armor similar to Ari's own. The larger set, however, sported strategically placed plates of hammered metal alloy, mismatched and dull from countless blows. The large woman uncrossed her arms as she pushed off the wall she'd been leaning against and flicked a long, auburn braid over her shoulder.

"Longer than you, Balex," Ari said. "Especially if you're still favoring that ankle."

Balex laughed, turning to walk beside the smaller woman. "Why are you little ones always so feisty?"

“Maybe because you keep calling us little,” Ari said. She turned her head and spat onto the tunnel floor, clearing her mouth of the faint copper taste that lingered. “I’m quite average for the chur clan.”

“She lies.” Another woman greeted them, slipping from the shadow and falling in beside the pair. “Ari’s just small. And angry.”

Even in the dark, Ari knew she and Gai looked similar. All chur were of the desert, golden-hued to match the sands. A peaceful people and small of stature, the camouflage was necessary for survival in the violent tribal lands. Born under strange stars, Ari and Gai had found they were unlike the other chur children and had often preferred physical confrontation over verbal conflict resolution.

Gai handed Ari a handful of clean linen. “Quite the fight today.”

Ari glanced sideways at Gai. She hadn’t noticed anyone on the fighter’s balcony, but it was an easy thing to miss once a contest had begun.

“Bugs are always nasty matches,” Balex agreed as Ari pressed the fabric to the long cut across her stomach. The tall woman made rapid clicking noises with her tongue as she snapped her fingers in Ari’s direction. “Be quick or be dead.”

“Give everything. Yield nothing,” Ari said in response. She caught a slight smile on Gai’s face. It had been their mantra since leaving the clan and it had served them well in their training as arena fighters. The chur pair were well-known for their ferocity despite their small stature.

“Do you need the healer?” Gai asked, the outline of her face becoming visible as they approached the entrance to the den. Light from smokeless torches and braziers gave the underground room an almost cozy atmosphere.

Other fighters, in various states of recovery or preparation, looked up as the trio entered. All women, the vira were celebrated warriors, each a champion with her own fans and following. Quietly, each woman raised her hand in the fighter’s salute. Ari paused and returned the gesture before heading to an empty bench in the corner. Conversation and preparation resumed behind them.

“No healer,” Ari said when Gai repeated her question. “Just a long soak in a deep tub.”

Lowering herself to the stone seat with an audible groan, Ari looked up to find both Gai and Balex staring at her with matching expressions of concern.

“Alright, well, maybe a bodyworker to massage my knee back into place.” Ari sniffed, beginning to think out loud. “Some salve wouldn’t hurt. A bandage or three for this slice across my middle. And, actually, I’m pretty sure a large bruise is forming across my ba—”

Gai sighed heavily, interrupting the list of injuries. She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and then leaned down, slipping her fingers behind Ari’s neck and touched their foreheads together. . Ari closed her eyes, breathing in the after-fight tang of Gai’s sweat. It was a common gesture of gratitude and affection among the chur clan.

“I’ll get the healer,” Gai said softly. Then she moved away into the den.

Ari watched Gai leave, a gentle clenching low in her belly telling the other chur, *don’t go*.

The less-subtle clearing of a large throat brought Ari’s attention back to her more immediate surroundings.

“When will you tell her?” Balex asked, one side of her mouth lifted in an amused smile.

“Never,” Ari said, deeply regretting her late-night, wine-induced confession of feelings to the half-giant.

Balex sucked on the insides of her cheeks before saying, “A warrior loses every battle she never fights.”

Ari scowled. “Love isn’t a battle.”

Balex grinned and tilted her head side to side in consideration. “It can be. At night, lights off. You’re both used to being lead. She takes your wrist in her hand and twists, pushing you against the wa—”

“Enough,” Ari said, holding up her hand and laughing. She groaned immediately, wincing and holding her stomach. “Enough, brutal Balex.”

Balex gave her a moment to recover from her pain, then said, “You should tell her.”

“Well, sure,” Ari said, lifting the linen from her stomach and grimacing at the wound. The bleeding had mostly stopped, but the gash was wide and jagged. She hoped it wouldn’t scar. “And if she does not feel the same, I will ruin a lifetime of friendship.”

“Besides,” Ari continued, waving her hand into the den, motioning to the absent chur and the rest of the vira. “We’re all like sisters here.”

“Sisters,” Balex agreed slowly. “Right.”

Her dry, taunting tone made Ari look up.

“If you have something to say, just say it.” Ari knew she sounded sharp, but her muscles had begun to stiffen, and she was starting to feel sore all over. The healer’s narcotics would be welcome when they arrived.

The half-giant pressed her lips together and took a deep breath.

Ari was saved by Gai’s appearance, though the healer and her drugs were noticeably absent.

“No medicines?” Ari asked before she realized Gai’s face was pale. “What is it?”

In answer, Gai held out a folded parchment. “This was waiting for me at the door.”

The sigil pressed into the golden wax seal caused Ari’s breath to catch in her chest. The symbol—outlines of two arrowheads laid over one another, one pointing up and the other down—was the crest of the chur. Not known for their literary abilities, letters from the clan were rare and often bore dire news.

“Open it,” Ari said softly, barely finding the air to speak. The pain in her body was forgotten over the tightness in her chest.

Gai snapped the letter open, reading it first in silence to herself. When she looked up, Ari could see devastation in her eyes.

“The clan’s been attacked,” Gai said. She took a deep breath. “There are so few left alive, they’re calling us home. It says, the chur will go to war.”

“Our families?” Ari asked.

Gai shook her head, her expression sad but not devastated.

Ari saw the face of her mother as she’d last seen her, the old woman’s mouth turned down in a deep frown and her brow creased with worry. They had never truly understood one another, but Ari had never questioned that she’d been loved.

“Who attacked?”

“It does not say.” Gai turned the letter over, searching for more information.

“What?” Reaching for the letter, Ari gasped as she felt her injuries stretch. She sat back against the bench, and Gai handed her the parchment. The message was short, hastily written. There was nothing more than what Gai had shared.

“We haven’t been back in so long,” Gai said, taking a seat on the bench next to Ari. “Living with the clan feels like a distant memory, like another life. And so many of them were glad to see us leave. Will we go?”

Ari, her vision unfocused as she stared at the stone under her feet, considered the question.

“Yes, I think we should,” she said, looking up at Gai. “To honor the memories of our mothers.”

Gai sucked on her cheek, looking out into the den. Ari knew she was thinking about her own bittersweet parting from the clan. Gai shrugged, then she nodded her agreement.

“Alright,” she said. She gestured around the den. “This was getting a little boring anyway.”

“Besides,” Ari added, trying to lighten the decision. “We might be the only chur alive who know how to fight. Our experience in the arena will serve them well.”

“We’ll have to find weapons outside of the city,” Gai said. “They won’t let us take the ones we use here.”

“We’ll find some,” Ari said, though she wasn’t as confident as she hoped she sounded. The swords and spears of the arena would have been a boon to the chur, but the law would not change simply because an outlying clan had decided to go to war. Since the arena fights had begun, it had been forbidden for vira to carry weapons inside of the city.

“And your friends will come with you,” Balex said. She looked around at the other vira, busy with their arena preparations. “Well, friend. Just me, I think.”

Ari looked up in surprise, briefly having forgotten the half-giant towering over them.

“You’d fight with us?” Gai asked. Ari could hear faint astonishment in the chur’s question.

“Are we not vira?” Balex asked. She turned to Ari, an almost savage grin on her face. “Are we not *sisters*?”

Catching the hidden meaning in Balex’s word choice, Ari lowered her head and wiped her hand over her face. The half-giant’s sense of humor was becoming almost as painful as the wound across her middle.

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Ari knew something was wrong before they had even caught sight of the city gates.

“There’s too many people here,” she said, barely avoiding a small child that had stepped into her path. The mother, she assumed, grabbed the girl and pulled her away from Ari, bobbing her head low as she would to a noble. Ari nodded at the woman, grateful for the show of respect.

“Balex,” Ari called over her shoulder. “What do you see?”

“Nothing yet, little one. People all the way to the main road.”

At the sound of the half-giant’s deep voice, people turned. Eyes widened in recognition, and the crowd attempted to step out of their way. With little room for such adjustment, the space made for the small group of fighters was quickly filled as they passed.

Ari heard strangers say her name. Some said it with enthusiasm, a triumphant exclamation. Others said it more quietly, their voices full of reverence. She nodded at those who would meet her eyes. They called loudly for Balex, who raised her hand and waved, smiling widely and pointing at the most enthusiastic of her admirers. Then, there were others who strove for Gai’s attention. The slender chur warrior ignored them, keeping her head low.

“This is insanity,” Gai murmured. She had been quiet since they’d left the den after saying farewell to the other vira. She adjusted the pack on her back and shadowed Ari closely, reaching out to set a hand on her shoulder as the crowd grew thicker and threatened to separate them.

“Gate’s closed,” Balex said as they rounded the last corner and joined the throng gathered in the small square. “Armed guards keeping everyone at a distance.”

Slowed to a standstill by the crush of bodies around them, Ari and Gai exchanged a glance. Their expressions were a matched set of irritation.

“Get us there, Balex,” Ari said, gesturing with her head toward the gate.

The large woman took the lead.

To his credit, the guard they approached neither took a step back nor expressed hesitancy in addressing the armored fighters.

“Vira,” he said in greeting.

Ari admired the human’s even tone. Though they kept the peace in the city, the guard lacked the same vicious training the vira acquired in the arena. Even unarmed, Ari’s bet would be on her fighting sisters against the gate sentries.

“Let us pass, little one,” Balex said, setting her hands on her hips and staring down at the guard. “We have places to be.”

The man visibly bristled, adjusting his stance and switching the poleaxe he held to his other hand. Ari covered her amusement by turning her head away. He seemed to enjoy being called “little one” even less than she did.

“Gates are closed,” the man said. “Even to you.”

“Open the gate,” someone called from the anonymity of the crowd. “Let us through!”

Before Ari could agree, other voices joined in protest.

“Let us through!”

“Can’t keep us here!”

“...violation of rights.”

“Don’t touch her!” Gai said fiercely as a set of hands were laid on Ari’s back and she was pushed forward.

Ari stumbled toward the guard, catching herself before she ran into him. The guard’s weapon was suddenly back in his dominant hand. He adjusted his stance and raised the poleaxe.

“Get back,” he said, his tone dark and stern.

Ari raised her hands and took a step back. The man was far less entertaining when wielding a sharpened blade. She turned to find Balex pulling Gai away from a man now cradling the side of his face. The chur fighter growled, pushed away from the half-giant, and came to stand next to Ari.

“We should go,” Balex said, scanning the crowd, her brow furrowed. “These people look very angry.”

“Let’s find the captain,” Ari said. “He’ll be able to tell us wh—”

Ari ducked as a stone sailed toward her head. She heard the guard behind her grunt and the clatter of steel as his weapon hit the ground. She turned in time to see the man’s eyes roll back as he crumbled to the street, blood streaming from a gash on his head. Ari heard Gai curse.

Another guard stumbled as he was hit in the chest with a second stone. From somewhere she couldn’t see, Ari heard the bark of a given command. Sentries carrying crossbows rose from their positions along the wall. More stones flew from somewhere in the back of the crowd. A second command caused the guards to raise their weapons to their shoulders, aiming into the crowd.

Gai’s hand closed over Ari’s wrist. “We’ve got to get out of h—”

A bolt took Gai in the chest, halting her mid-breath. The chur’s hand slipped from Ari’s arm. Her large, golden eyes pleaded for help, then lost focus. She swayed. Ari reached out,

wrapping her arms around Gai's middle and lowering her to the ground. Around them, Ari was only vaguely aware the crowd was yelling, raising their hands in violence.

Tears spilled down Gai's pale cheeks. Her mouth moved as if she was trying to speak. A wet, gurgling sound came from her throat. She was choking on the blood filling her chest.

"No." Ari's grip tightened, and her vision blurred. She wiped her eyes, willing herself not to cry. "No, don't go..."

Slowly, as if she were only tired, Gai closed her eyes.

"Gai," Ari said softly. She set her forehead against Gai's and sobbed. "Gai, wake up."

Though she begged, she knew Gai was already gone. On her knees, Ari gathered Gai into her lap. She took deep, ragged breaths of Gai's familiar scent. It was tainted now, mixed with dust from the road and the heavy smell of iron long left to rust.

Ari was suddenly sprawled across the road, a deep pain radiating from her upper back. She gasped, trying to catch the breath that had been knocked from her body. Raising her head, she saw that someone had fallen into her and now lay next to her, unmoving.

She heard screaming, the clang of steel met with steel, and the shuffle of many bodies. The gate yard had become a killing arena. Pushing herself to her knees, Ari began to crawl.

"Get away from her!" Ari waved her hands as if they could dispel the heavy boots that threatened to crush Gai.

Ari was again thrown to the side as a careless knee caught her ribs. She groaned, curling up to protect her wounded middle as she tried once more to catch her breath. Panting, she took a chance and looked up. The face of the human gate sentry that had first spoken with them lay directly in front of her. His eyes were still open, but vacant. The stone had done its work.

Beside him lay the poleaxe he had dropped. Gooseflesh rose on Ari's arms and thighs. She reached for the weapon.

The chaos in the yard quieted. Ari's fingers wrapped around the wooden shaft. Slowly, she rose to her feet. When she looked up, she immediately locked eyes with another of the city's guard. The woman saw the weapon in Ari's hand.

"Drop it, vira," the guard said, holding her own weapon to the side, her empty hand palm down. "You know you're not allowed to have that."

Ari's lip twitched as if she was about to smile. Before the woman could say more, Ari hefted the weapon in both hands and swung, lodging the axe blade in the guard's chest. The

woman made no sound as she fell to the ground. Ari set her boot on the woman's chest and levered the weapon free.

From the corner of her eye, Ari saw the flash of an armored uniform. She spun, bringing her poleaxe up in time to block the overhead attack. The guard leaned forward, bearing his weight down and forcing Ari to buckle.

In her ear, Ari heard Gai's voice, quiet and fierce. "Give everything. Yield nothing."

A cold fire, unlike anything Ari had ever felt, rushed through her body. She screamed and flung her head forward, smashing her forehead into the guard's nose. He stumbled back, dropping his weapon as he raised a hand to his bloodied face. Ari advanced, using her own momentum to drive the sharpened spear-top of her weapon into the man's middle. He grunted, his face contorting with pain and disbelief.

Ari pulled the poleaxe free once more and turned away, leaving him to die in the road. She would kill them all for what they had done to Gai.

Bodies littered the ground in the yard, guard and civilian, human and chur. More squirmed in the dirt, holding bloodied limbs and gashes in their bellies. The crowd had thinned, those unfamiliar with violence having fled. Still others had been pushed back by the city guard, away from the gate. Balex was nowhere to be seen.

"Give everything! Yield nothing!" Ari yelled at those still fighting, echoing Gai's voice in her head. She raised the poleaxe and pointed it toward the gate. "They can't keep us here! We have the right to leave! They can't k—"

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The world was dark and full of pain. Even with her eyes closed, from the deep, wet smell of loam Ari could tell she was back in the den. Though, even through the deep hurt, she knew it was unusually quiet. Perhaps she had been the last fight of the day and the other vira had already departed for their baths and medicinal wines. She couldn't quite remember.

Ari didn't try to fight the fog in her head. The healer would come soon, bringing the oils and tinctures that would help her to regain her senses and her memory. She just wished the woman would hurry. The ache in her head was murderous.

What seemed like hours after regaining consciousness, Ari had grown cold and begun to suspect the healer was not actually on her way. She opened her eyes.

She had to blink several times to convince herself that her eyes were, indeed, open. She lay in an unforgiving darkness. She was certainly not lying on a bench in the den. Reaching out, Ari could touch three rough rock walls. The fourth, somewhere by her feet, had a thin sliver of flickering light that passed underneath what Ari assumed was a door. Holding a hand over the sharp pain of her middle, and mindful of the stiff soreness in her body, she crawled toward the light. Finding the wood of the door, she held her hand out and was just able to see the outline of her fingers in the unsteady beam.

“Help.” Ari’s voice was soft and weak, much broken from the dryness in her mouth and throat. “Someone...”

Without the strength to yell for aid, Ari settled back against the floor. Shivering, she pressed her cheek against the cold stone beneath her, willing the thickness in her mind to clear. Slowly, she remembered the letter from the clan and Balex’s vow to join the chur in battle. She remembered leaving the den at dawn and heading toward the city gate.

Reliving Gai’s death, Ari felt hot tears slip down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around her own shoulders, grunting as the bandage around her middle pulled at her wound. It felt stuck. She dimly recalled the injury pulling open as she had swung the poleaxe at a city guard. Giving in to the deep, sharp ache of loss, Ari cried until she felt numb in both body and mind.

At some point, she realized she was in one of the cells hewn from the deep rock far below the den. Closets of silence and madness, this was the prison reserved for the city’s most heinous criminals. In a moment of fierce clarity, she knew she deserved to be left in the dark and forgotten.

After some time, Gai came to her, and Ari was dimly aware the fever in her body had taken her mind. The chur fighter sat with Ari’s head in her lap, stroking her hair and wiping the dirt from her face.

“Gai...” Ari’s voice sounded like stone pulled over stone, grating and raw. “I’m so sorry.”

It wasn’t enough. Ari’s decision had gotten Gai killed. Guilt, hot and heavy, burned in Ari’s gut. It was quickly followed by a burning rage. It had been the council’s command to shut the gate. The faceless collection of nobles that ran the city were the only people with enough power to command the guard to fire on its citizens. Ari didn’t care why they had made that choice. All she knew was that it had been *their* decision that had killed Gai.

“I’ll kill them all,” Ari whispered. In the deep dark, the threat sunk into the stone and was gone.

Gai's smile was benevolent as she touched Ari's face. She almost glowed in the dark of the cell. The chur leaned down and touched her golden lips to Ari's mouth. As she sat back up, she began to grow dim.

"No." Ari whimpered as the memory of Gai lying in a pool of her own blood slowly replaced her phantom image. "Don't... Don't leave me."

Swaying between one world and the next, Ari was faintly aware of the exquisite fever overwhelming her senses. She began to shiver once more, shuddering violently before she was lost to a depthless plunge into unconsciousness.

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She didn't remember them taking her from the cell or what must have been hours of the healer's administrations. She was aware of being warm instead of cold, and that the persistent pain in her head had faded. She knew she was no longer lying on a stone floor but a soft mattress, and that—far away—the crowd was calling her name.

Ari, Ari, Ari...

Ari's brow furrowed as she realized it wasn't a crowd, but the noise of a single person. Their voice was thin and buzzy, like a fly caught in wine at the bottom of a cup. Ari grunted, hoping that would be enough to silence the insect.

"You're conscious. Good." The fly cleared its throat. "Arabeka Rubiat of the Chur Nation, you are formally sentenced in your incitation of the riot in Gate Square and for the offense of carrying steel with the city. I have been dispatched to deliver the council's final verdict and punishment for your crimes."

Ari opened her eyes, squinting up at the blurry shadow of someone looming over her bed. Lacking the strength of will to pull herself from under a heavy blanket, Ari realized that some of the healer's tinctures must have been to keep her still and sleeping. Her head was full of a familiar fog that slowed her understanding of the delivered message.

"My incitation?" Ari finally asked, piecing together what had been said. "My punishment? I didn't start that fight."

The messenger's face slowly came into focus. A human male who might have been attractive, he sported a deep black eye that, though healing, was still swollen. The blue and green of the bruise took up most of his cheek. A large bandage covered his other eye, and his right arm sat stiff in a linen sling.

“I was at the gate,” the man said as if he had read Ari’s mind. Fury burned in his eyes. “The first man to die was my brother.”

Ari’s stomach clenched as she realized she was being blamed for the uprising. Her disorientation turned to bewilderment. Again, the man must have read the emotion on her face. His laughter was cruel.

“Didn’t think you’d be held responsible for your crime, did you, *vira*?” He almost spat the word. The guard held out a scroll he didn’t bother to unroll. He tossed it onto the bed at Ari’s feet. “It will be a pleasure to watch you die.”

Before she could respond, the man had turned and left, leaving the door to the recovery room open.

As Ari struggled to sit, she found that the wound in her middle had been freshly bound. It ached, but the injury felt better than it had since her fight in the arena. She wondered how long she’d been in the cell, and how long they had waited for her to recover.

Propping herself up with the pillow that had been under her head, she found herself in small but comfortable room. There were no windows, but a smokeless fire burned in a hearth past the foot of her bed. Though it gave off very little heat, Ari suddenly found herself sweating. She pushed off the blanket and reached for the metal cup and pitcher she saw on the bedside table. She poured herself some water and then held the cup in her lap, staring at the scroll near her feet for a long time. A solid lump of dread sat in her throat. She knew the missive contained the means of her death.

Ari took a long, deep drink and set the cup on the table. Reaching for the scroll, she allowed herself no delay. She broke the seal and read the short letter.

Arabeka Rubiat of the Chur Nation,

*For the crimes of inciting a riot directly leading to the deaths of five (5) gate sentries, AND
for wielding a bladed weapon within city limits, you are hereby sentenced to*

death by combat on the morrow.

The convicted will not be granted last rites or requests.

Signed,

Several signatures were scrawled across the bottom of the parchment. Ari couldn’t read a single one, but then she’d never bothered to learn the names of the city’s council. Though

the rich and wealthy of the city paid for the arena and its kept fighters, Ari and Gai had long stayed clear of any direct patronage. To accept someone's coin meant you belonged to them, and the chur had never meant for the city to become home. Even before the letter from the clan, Ari and Gai had begun to discuss leaving. Now, they never would.

Ari lowered her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was quiet a moment, then she laughed, the sound quick and harsh.

They had sentenced her to die in the arena, a death she had anticipated every time she'd removed her boots and stepped into the sands. Surely, they could have come up with a more creative punishment.

Ari's smile faded.

Politics had never held her interest, but it occurred to her that the gate had been closed to keep the population safe from whatever was happening beyond the walls. If those who had attacked the chur were foolish enough to come for the city, it was possible the council had felt the need to take extreme measures. Ari shook her head. That excused nothing.

Now, they needed someone to blame for the outcome of their poor decision. So, they had taken great pains to keep her from perishing in the stone cells. She was meant to serve their penance and distract the city from the truth of the council's blunder.

The thought of such an undeserved death made Ari's stomach turn, a soft anger bubbling in her belly. Laying back on the bed, she began to stretch her extremities. Wounded, heartbroken, and guilty, there was little she could do to change her fate. But there was a voice, oddly similar to Gai's whispering encouragement from deep within.

Give everything. Yield nothing.

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The den was strangely empty. Only a quarter of the torches had been lit, and the other vira were notably absent. Ari wondered if they had been kept from joining her or if they had chosen to stay away. She sighed heavily, feeling the weight of their assumed condemnation. It deepened her sadness to think they would believe she had orchestrated that riot.

Struggling to don the leather armor that had been left for her, she found she could not fault them. She was sure they believed she had instigated the fight in the gate yard, and she had carried a weapon inside the city, a crime very few of the vira had ever committed.

Cursing the difficulty of hard-to-reach straps, Ari glanced toward the guards that stood nearby. Their harsh, scowling faces immediately dissuaded her from asking for assistance. They had said very little to her since commanding her to rise from her sickbed and follow them. It had been a slow walk, Ari's body still stiff and sore and her heart heavy.

When she was finally ready, she turned to the guards. They flicked their hands toward the tunnel to the arena.

Barefoot, Ari felt the stone floor of the den give way to sand, the grit clinging to the bottom of her feet. Eyes on the light at the end of the tunnel, she focused on her breathing, a habit Gai had taught her to help remain calm before a fight. At the thought of the lost chur, a sharp pang of loss ripped through Ari's chest. She gasped, reaching for the tunnel wall and clutching at her still-bound middle. The physical pain helped to clear some of the piercing misery.

"Gai," she said the name quietly. Closing her eyes, she pictured the chur, her amber eyes smiling and golden hair brilliantly lit by the sun. Ari wiped tears from her cheeks and took a deep breath. There was some solace that her pain would soon be over. When she again felt steady, Ari continued up the tunnel.

Shadowed coolness retreated, giving way to sun-baked heat. She slowed her walk, giving her eyes time to adjust to the archway of bright light she approached. Within moments, she stepped into the arena.

Immediately, she noticed the silence. She could hear the wind catch in the large banners that snapped high above the arena. Ari squinted, looking into the stands. The crowd was there, but it was thin. She could see several places where the stone benches remained empty. Instead of cheering her arrival, people sat with their boots to the stone and their hands clasped in their laps. It seemed they had already passed their judgement.

She glanced toward the fighter's balcony. To her surprise, several of the vira stood in the deep shadow of the recess hewn from the arena's stone. Many had not come, but most of those she had considered friends watched with solemn faces. Slowly, they raised their hands in the fighter's salute. Ari returned the gesture, standing a little taller. At the last, she would be proud to die their sister.

When she turned away, a chill took her. While her attention had been focused on the vira, the crowd had stood, lifting their hands in their own silent salute.

A deep, unsettling feeling settled in Ari's stomach. She felt her jaw quiver with emotion. They hadn't condemned her; they were here to support their fighter. It suddenly occurred to

her that she really had no idea what had been happening in the city while she'd been in the deep cells and in recovery.

A short blast of horns abruptly refocused Ari's attention. Warning of an imminent fight, the sound never failed to set her heart pumping. Aware she held no weapon, Ari hoped she had the grace to die well without a chance to defend herself.

Turning toward the large arch at the far side of the arena, through which the bugs would be driven, she waited. Nothing happened.

A collective gasp from the crowd caused Ari to turn.

Limping from the fighter's tunnel, her head down and favoring her left ankle, Balex moved toward the center of the arena. She was flanked by three guards. Two carried the viras' favored weapons, while the third held a crossbow pointed at Balex's back. The guard on the left struggled to carry the half-giant's massive sword. Its point left a long gouge in the sand where he dragged it. When he drew close, he dropped the weapon. The guard on the right tossed a matched set of short swords at Ari's feet. At least they'd thought to bring her favorite blades.

Ari had stood her ground as they approached, her hands curled into fists at the sight of the half-giant. Balex still hadn't raised her head. Her auburn hair hung in dirty locks, hiding her face.

"Coward," Ari hissed as the half-giant came to stand by her side. Glancing at the sentries still standing over them, Ari struggled not to snatch her swords from the sand. She hadn't thought she would get opportunity to confront Balex, though she had cursed her many times in the dark for abandoning them at the gate.

"We needed you." Ari's voice almost broke as she thought of Gai, dying in her arms. "Why did you run?"

"Run?" Balex finally lifted her head, the confusion clear on her face.

Ari gasped, her anger momentarily forgotten. A gash ran from the top of Balex's forehead, over her cheek and down to her jaw. It continued high on the half-giant's chest and disappeared under her thick leather arena-armor. The wound had clearly been cleaned, but it was edged pink with infection. It was clear Balex had not escaped the violence at the gate as Ari had believed.

"I didn't run," the half-giant said softly. Her eyes were lightly fever-bright. "I saw the one who took Gai from us. I climbed the stairs to the wall, and I did for him what he did for her."

Ari closed her eyes, clenching her jaw as a confusion of emotions raged tore at her heart. Finally, she opened her eyes and reached out, setting a hand on Balex's forearm. She believed the vira.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Ari said. "I should have known."

Balex nodded, seeming to accept the apology. Then, she lifted her chin and gestured at the crowd.

"They have come to watch us die," Balex said.

Ari couldn't stop the sour smile that spread across her face. "They have always come to watch us die."

"Pick up your weapons," the guard holding the crossbow said, interrupting further conversation.

Balex looked at Ari, her surprised expression giving way to dark humor. "We will take many of the bugs with us, won't we, little one?"

Ari snorted, amused at Balex's optimism. Bending her knees, she picked up the short swords the guard had dropped in the sand. She hefted them, inspecting the weight as if she had not fought with them a hundred times.

"We'll take as many as we can," she said, watching Balex bend at the waist to retrieve her own weapon. Ari had an odd sense of lightness, as if despite this sentence, everything was going to be alright. Soon, she would join Gai in whatever lay beyond this world.

Someone from the quiet crowd called the half-giant's name.

Balex turned, lifting the large sword above her head with two hands. She screamed. It was a deep, bellowing sound of pain and rage. It was a shout that promised brutality of the most primal form. Ari almost shuddered, feeling something instinctual inside of her respond, an urge to join in the howl.

There was a breath of silence, and then the crowd erupted, matching the vira's passionate, wordless yell with their own emotion-filled screams.

Balex shouted again and then set the flat of her blade across her shoulders and grinned down at Ari.

"That is better," she said. "Now we are ready to kill bugs." She turned her attention to the three guards still standing in the area. "You might want to head for the safety of the tunnel. This is no place for city sentries."

“There are no bugs today,” the guard with the crossbow said. She swung her weapon between the vira as the horn once more signaled the beginning of a fight.

Ari frowned. “They can’t mean...”

“I think they do,” Balex said, turning in a slow circle. “I think we are meant to fight each other.”

Ari felt like the bottom of her stomach had fallen out. She stared up at Balex, eyes wide, and shook her head slowly.

“I won’t,” she said at last.

“You will,” the guard with the crossbow said, “or we will execute you.” She lifted her weapon and pointed it at Ari’s chest. The other guards pulled swords from the sheathes at their waists.

The thud of Balex’s enormous sword hitting the ground was barely audible over the noise of the crowd. When the guard swung her crossbow at the half-giant, Ari took the opportunity to drop her own swords.

With their weapons in the sand, the crowd seemed to sense something unusual was happening. The arena grew quiet.

The guard sighed heavily, clearly agitated.

“Pick up your weapons,” she said. Then, without lowering her crossbow, she looked behind and jerked her head at the other sentries. They advanced, swords held low in front of them.

Ari glanced at Balex, suddenly wishing she hadn’t tossed her weapons to the ground. They’d had worse odds than three-to-two, though the crossbow was concerning. She took a step back, holding her hands out and low as if she could convince the guards she wasn’t a threat.

Then, she heard the crowd. Guttural howls of displeasure accompanied short barks of disapproval. Taking a chance, Ari turned her attention toward the stands. Stones were being hurled into the arena. None could be thrown far enough to endanger the group in the middle, but it was clear the audience was not entertained by the looming slaughter of the vira.

Ari saw guards begin to filter in behind the crowd. They carried crossbows. She heard the shouts of disappointment turn to anger and fear. Someone screamed—a terrified, piercing sound. It was going to be the gate riot all over again. In her mind, Ari saw the bolt strike Gai in the chest, saw the blood run from her mouth. They had taken the one she loved, and now

they would do the same to other innocent people. Though she had only ever fought for their entertainment, Ari felt an intense protective urge to even the injustice.

Ari turned to Balex. "We can't let them do this."

The half-giant nodded, almost imperceptibly. With a wordless yell, she charged the guards.

Ari dove for her weapons. She hit the ground and rolled, rising to her feet with a steel blade in each hand. The guard closest to her was faster than she had expected, and she had to throw herself again, rolling sideways over the dirt to avoid the sweeping arc of his sword. Ari felt a sharp pain across her stomach as the wound in her middle was once more ripped open.

She raised her blades, barely deflecting a heavy blow. He tried her left, then her right. Each time he thrust, she narrowly avoided his weapon. Gasping for air, she knew she had to end the fight quickly. She didn't have the stamina or strength she'd had before her incarceration. She retreated, stepping back each time the guard attacked.

Sweat dripping down her face, Ari finally saw her opening. Leaving her own side exposed, she took her chance. Swinging one blade high, the guard took the bait and raised his own to deflect her strike. Quickly, Ari thrust with her second sword. Her blade slipped between her opponent's armor and under his ribs. He crumbled to the sand.

Ari turned to find Balex standing over the bodies of the two other guards. The half-giant's shoulders were slumped, and she appeared to be leaning on the hilt of her massive sword, its blade buried in the sand. When she saw Ari, she took an unsteady step forward. Ari rushed to her side, finding a crossbow bolt lodged in the vira's side.

"Balex..."

The half-giant lifted the corner of her mouth in a partial smile and shook her head. "Just a scratch, little one. I'll live."

Ari could hear the sounds of combat all around them. The guards had attacked the crowd, and the people had defended themselves. When she looked, she could see some of the other vira lending aid to the wounded and shielding the citizens from the worst of the guards' advances.

"Our fight isn't over," Ari said.

Balex looked into the stands and lifted her massive sword. "Give everything."

Ari heard Gai's voice, gentle and brave, join her own when she said, "Yield nothing."

Together, the half-giant and the chur joined the skirmish in the stands. Ari knew she might never get a chance to defend her clan beyond the walls, but fighting the guard that had killed Gai felt like vengeance and it felt right. Hoping to survive beyond the arena and find cause to confront the city council, Ari battled side-by-side with the populace she had once entertained.

-Fin-