

Chapter 201: Better Than Most

The ex-Emperor's Fist led Thalia down below the arena to a smaller and more secluded training area: a small sand-covered ring that was only a dozen metres wide. The woman, Athena, hardly stopped speaking the entire walk there, mostly filling the silence with conversation about the arena and how things worked within the Women's Fighting League. Thalia ignored it all, her eyes hardly leaving the muscular back of the assassin as she analysed the way she carried herself.

Each step was deliberate, her movements graceful and precise – leaving hardly a sound as she stepped, despite the boots she was wearing. The large tattoo was of a waterfall, with orange and black fish swimming up the raging waters. The corpse of a slain golden dragon lay at the top, a snow leopard laying proudly across its kill. "Thalia." Thalia glanced upwards, Athena's grey eyes watching her back. "What?" Thalia questioned bluntly.

"I asked you a question: how is Arthuria?" Athena interrogated, stopping in the centre of the training ring and folding her arms, the muscle rippling across her forearms as she drummed her fingers. Thalia's body tensed, her brown eyes narrowing as she tried to read Athena. "You... know Arthuria? How?" Thalia questioned back. Athena rolled her eyes. "I was a Sister, if that wasn't obvious. I know Arthuria from then."

"Arthuria was a nun?" Thalia said with a blank face. Athena's face mirrored hers before she looked down and chuckled. "Gods... Is she alive, barbarian?" Athena questioned more forcefully. "Last I saw... yes," Thalia returned, beginning to circle around the edge of the small arena – her anchor in her arms. "Which was?" Athena pressed, mirroring Thalia's movements. "Not long ago, the djinn fucked up a spell so we have been separated." Athena frowned, and Thalia leapt at her, lifting her anchor high before slamming it down towards her. Athena took to slightest step backwards, her foot placed on top of the weapon and her face mere centimetres away from Thalia's. "We were under assault by a Betrayer, in defence of that suit of sparks and bolts."

"I see," Athena said softly, pondering for a moment as Thalia tried to wrench her weapon out from under Athena's foot. It didn't move, the entire weapon locked in place in an unfamiliar, supernatural manner. Athena stopped her pondering and focused back on Thalia. "I'm waiting, what happened to that ferocity?" she goaded. Thalia roared, engaging her Focus and dragging the weapon

downwards through the sand and the stone, rather than attempting to press back against Athena's own Focus. "Better," commented Athena.

Thalia lunged, swinging the weapon and releasing it, switching her grip to the anchor's extended handle and chain. She twirled like a tornado, the anchor swinging hard and fast and sweeping up sand to blind Athena. Athena darted backwards, taking several small leaps to avoid the swings. The sand didn't bother her, she didn't need her eyes to see Thalia. The weapon swung past her head and Athena darted forwards, grabbing the chain and using her body as a leverage to swing the anchor back towards Thalia.

Thalia grunted as her own weapon hit her, her hands grabbing the metal as she skid across the sand. She grinned, the weapon's chain was now wrapped around Athena. Thalia pulled the chain tight, taking the chance to swing Athena instead. Thalia then moved to swing the assassin into the nearest wall, but Athena just slipped out of the binding, her body contorting and bones shifting before returning to form as she slipped out. She hung onto the chain, yanking hard and pulling Thalia towards her as she pulled up and launched herself forwards. They collided – hard.

Thalia's head rang as she staggered backwards, Athena grabbing her anchor and wrenching it out of her hands before tossing the weapon aside with a clang. Athena then darted backwards, lifting out a hand before beckoning for Thalia to come at her. "I will not lose," Thalia stated confidently, gritting her teeth and channelling her full Focus into her fists. "Amongst the crew, none are stronger than me!"

"Cocky, aren't we. Show me," Athena commanded, Thalia roaring as she charged towards her. She leapt at Athena, throwing a flying punch that Athena simply guided past her by tapping the outside of Thalia's wrist. Thalia's strike went wide and she fell flat on her face as Athena tripped her. "Sloppy. Power only goes so far these days." Thalia twisted on the ground, swinging out a heavy kick towards Athena's shin. Athena turned, taking the kick on her calves and letting Thalia knock her down. As she fell, she dropped her elbow straight down into Thalia's stomach.

Thalia threw up bile, Athena immediately moving to grapple her. Athena wrapped her arm around Thalia's neck, locking her arm and squeezing hard. Thalia's vision began to darken, but she simply grinned. The assassin was as cocky as she was: grappling had been her favourite past time growing up, it was her battlefield and a soldier doesn't forget their wars. Thalia had mere seconds,

she knew that better than anyone. She reached down for Athena's leg, grabbing her knee and wrenching. A groan came from above but the grip did not release. Thalia Focused on her elbow, lifting it up and driving it down into Athena's leg. The hold didn't release, and darkness took her.

Thalia came to several seconds later, immediately bolting upright and preparing for round two. Instead Athena was sat on the floor a few metres away, rubbing her leg. She held up a hand. "You lost. It's over," she stated firmly, a warning glint in her cold gaze. Thalia sat back down and lay back on the floor. "How?" she questioned quietly to herself, rather to Athena. "How am I this weak?" she screamed, slamming her fist onto the floor and kicking up a cloud of sand.

"You're not, is the simple answer." Thalia glanced towards her. "Against most people, in the world, you'd come out on top," Athena said softly. She let out a groan, a soft crack audible across the room as she fixed her leg and cautiously stood up. She shook her leg side to side before bouncing on her feet, the injury seemingly gone. *Listen to those above you, they will tell you how to beat them.* Jayce's words rang in Thalia's mind as Athena turned back to her. "It's your technique."

"You can use Focus, but not in abundance. You have one tool – a good tool – but a two-dimensional method. Your strikes are simple, and obvious, and that is a weakness that lets you down," Athena said plainly. Thalia looked the assassin up and down. She didn't seem any different, and even as Thalia analysed her with Focus nothing truly stood out. Athena sighed, before she tensed her body. Thalia's eyes widened as in a rippling wave, from Athena's feet to her head, she radiated Focus: a ripple of red, then blue, then cyan before finally black, as Athena controlled her Focus between different levels and in every aspect. "I know what I'm talking about," she stated purely and firmly.

"Then why tell me?" Thalia questioned, sensing an angle she wasn't seeing. "Because, whilst it was far from perfect, I enjoyed our bout. I'm stuck here – a long-term duty, let's say – so I want to ensure that whilst here I get the opportunity to practice and improve. I can only do that if I face someone of equal or higher capability, and - big girl – you could certainly be either, with a bit of training and guidance. So... lunch?" she offered.

Thalia didn't quite know what to think of the events of the last day or so, as she sat at a nice restaurant, grinning whilst the waiters attending them started to cry as she and Athena emptied out the restaurant's fridges, the pair ordering meal after meal. Between Dragons and assassins everything seemed to be going wrong. Yet, as she devoured meal after meal with her companion, it also all

seemed to be going beyond right. One braver-than-most employee, probably a manager, cautiously approached the pair as they tore apart a practically raw steak with a fork and their teeth. "Uh, excuse me, gent- I mean, ladies. We will need to see funds up front before we bring out any more food," he stated with false bravado.

Thalia and Athena both glanced towards him, a glare from both of them causing him to topple over backwards, foaming from the mouth. "Another!" Thalia bellowed, holding an empty bottle of ridiculously expensive wine in the air. "Same here!" Athena stated, letting out an ear-drum bursting belch. As the staff raced away to tend to their needs, Athena leaned forwards. "You have money, right?" she questioned. Thalia frowned.

"Do you not?" she questioned back. Athena glanced out of the window, the city below them. "My... funds are being sent elsewhere." Thalia tracked Athena's gaze, her own eyes settling on a gaggle of young school children being walked through the streets with a carer. "Do we need to pay?" Thalia questioned back, looking at the lavishly dressed patrons all escaping the restaurant. "We should," Athena said softly, looking back inside the restaurant at the frightened staff.

Thalia let out a sigh and stood up, approaching the most lavishly dressed of the fleeing patrons. The terrified pair stared up at her as they clutched their gemstones and gold. "You're so kind to be paying our bill," she said menacingly, leaning forwards and placing a gentle finger on the man's collar. "Get your-" "Dear!" interrupted his wife, firmly, her eyes unwilling to look away from the monster in front of her for fear of what might happen. "Do what the barbarian wants."

Thalia sat down, a wealthy tip ensured for all the staff and their bill more than settled. "Happy?" she questioned, picking up the menu and gesturing for the staff to approach. "Most certainly," Athena said, raising a bottle to her. Thalia did the same, clinking the glass together. They departed more than an hour later, staggering back to the arena before stopping inside its main lobby. "Head downstairs to our ring, I need to inform the boss you're eligible," Athena said concisely, the drunkenness fading away as if she willed it. Thalia nodded, giving a loose thumbs up. "I'm going to work you hard. You know that, right?" "Me too."

The crowd roared, the stands shaking, as Thalia strolled into the arena. She had left her anchor behind, but she was far from weaponless. Her opponent stood waiting for her: a master of sneak attacks and dirty fighting, a bald, short woman

dressed in skin-tight clothing. A gnarly scar ran across her nose, her eyes both dark blue. Her mouth was covered by a mask, but Thalia could tell she bore the same expression as her: a grin of excitement.

The dirty fighter: Elinda the Chainweaver, drew her signature weapons – a pair of metal chains covered in spikes – twirling them for the deafening crowd and kicking up sand before taking a stance. The announcer was saying something, a well-prepared speech to create tension and excitement in the audience as a narrative was created for why they wanted to hurt each other. There was no need, a fight was a fight – a chance to break bones and draw blood. Neither of the women cared for a reason.

Thalia glanced towards the high boxes, the other fighters and elite patrons staring down at her. A single pair of eyes drew her gaze, a silent nod giving permission to go all out. Thalia turned back, her grin widening and eyes locking onto her prey, the first of many as she began her crusade to fight her new friend, mentor, and rival. “Begin!” roared the announcer, Thalia and the Chainweaver surging towards each other.

The Chainweaver threw up sand towards Thalia, but Thalia dropped low, sliding through the dust cloud to collide with the Chainweaver’s legs. But the Chainweaver took the blow, leaping at the last moment to take the impact and turning it into momentum for a forwards somersault. She slashed her chains down towards Thalia who lifted up her arms, blocking the slashes, grimacing as the spiked chains embedded themselves and wrapped around her arms. Thalia came to a short stop as the chains yanked her arms upwards.

The Chainweaver turned, Thalia caught in his chains and still laying on the floor. It was her win, it had to be. But Thalia grabbed the chains with her hands, ignoring the pain of the spikes before pulling hard in a whip-like the motion. The Chainweaver was flung over her, slamming into the ground in front of her where she lay dazed for a moment. Thalia then yanked, ripping the handles of the Chainweaver’s weapons out of her grip, disarming her before she took the chains in her hands and snapped them free of their handles. She peeled the spiky chains off her forearms as the Chainweaver shakily got to her feet. “Now then,” Thalia stated, towering over the far smaller and disarmed woman, her arms dripping blood. “My turn,” she stated with a grin.

Thalia departed the arena as a victor, moments later, but she didn’t walk with her head held high. Her arms hurt, she had been injured and, even disarmed, the Chainweaver had still put up a fight. She was still far off from defeating the

assassin that had beat her. She passed through the gates. *Don't think about him, Athena had warned. Even amongst the Emperor's Fists there were monsters beyond the assassins. Two stood out. One left early, the other was left behind. Oni was left behind and received proper training. The other is a Betrayer.*

Thalia shook her head, before raising it high. "One after another they will fall. I will make sure of it."

Seize the Seas Tales: Worst Of All

Fenn screamed as he was flung from the purple void. He tumbled through the air, floating through clouds as he was dragged downwards by the brutal clutches of gravity. He couldn't see the ground, but he felt in his stomach and through the thin air that it was some distance below: a certainly fatal distance below. Something passed his eye: a piece of rock – a ledge of some kind – and instinctively he grabbed for it.

He gripped rock for the briefest of moments, his claws digging into the surface as his momentum scraped him downwards, his body slamming into the side of something large and hard. "No, no, no, no, noooo!" he yelled, scrambling for anything to stop his fall. He felt his fingers tear, his claws shred away against the stone, but slowly he stopped in his place, hanging onto something. The wind whipped around him, the noise deafening other than his own rapid heartbeat and heavy panting.

Cautiously, he looked down. Clouds floated beneath him, his boots on the edge of the tiniest of ledges, his fingers gripping the smallest of cracks in a light coloured stone. The clouds parted for a moment a red haze below him. He snapped his head back to the wall. "Oh Gods," he muttered, tempering his stomach as he tried not to vomit. He looked upwards, a ledge a few metres away. "You can do this," he said quietly to himself, cautiously sliding his right hand upwards until he found a grip. He kicked off his boots and began to climb.

It felt like a lifetime, but eventually his hand found a grip more than a few centimetres deep. He groaned as he pulled himself upwards, resting his head on the ledge and taking a deep breath of success. His eyes shut and he grinned. "Hell yeah!" he said firmly, a series of clicks forcing his eyes back open as he felt he was no longer alone. "Uh," he uttered without thought, staring at the multiple guns pointed at his face. "I surrender."

A loud cry of a familiar bird drew his attention away from the numerous rifles, all being wielded by identical-looking people. A loud crash immediately

followed, throwing up a cloud of dust as Wren slammed into the ground nearby – Falconer tumbling off her back to land only a few metres away from Fenn. A sigh of relief escaped Fenn – he wasn't alone. The relief then faded as a pair of arms grabbed his body and dragged him up off the ledge. Something hard and spiky pressed into his back and his vision went to black as a jolt of lightning coursed through him.

He awoke to find himself in a dark cell. "Fuck me! Not again!" he cried out, a faint beam of light illuminating the otherwise pure darkness. A groan alerted him to the other presence in the stone cell, somewhere near the thick metal bars. "Falconer?" Fenn questioned, his body in agony as he slowly got to his feet and then staggered over to the other body. The familiar and unique eyes of Falconer slowly opened, the golden crosses glowing in the darkness as he looked up at Fenn. "Fenn... where are we?" he asked with a pained groan.

Fenn looked around. They were in the air, on some sort of floating city or castle. His eyes widened. "We're on a djinn palace, I don't know where. What happened? Where is everyone else? Are we alone?" he rattled off in confusion, looking to the man who often held countless answers. Falconer held up a slow hand as he recovered, shutting his eyes and breathing heavy before slowly getting to his feet. "The teleportation was disrupted, we were thrown through the void – it is fortunate that we are even alive. As to the others..." he answered before reaching for his necklace, only to falter as he failed to find it. "Curious..." "What is?" Fenn asked.

"We have been stripped of our equipment and magic items. I suppose they know what to look for, most typically overlook our necklaces. And they have put antimagic bindings on us," he added, looking down at the bronze band across his wooden arm and then pointing out the metal collar around Fenn's neck. "Huh?" he questioned, only just realising he was in human form before desperately trying to pull off the metal collar. "Hang on," Falconer stated, reaching up for the collar. "We will use Focus, concentrate on the front, I will pull from the back. Three, two, one," he instructed.

They then both screamed, dropping to their knees in unity as they clutched their heads. An agonizing void filled their mind, the cells across their body feeling like they were gasping for air. They immediately ceased their attempt, both panting heavily. "What... the... fuck?" Fenn gasped, Falconer shaking his head. "Where are we?" Falconer questioned in turn, looking towards Fenn. He

shrugged, before he remembered what he had briefly seen before. "We were over something red, like a desert of sorts."

"The Scourge. We are near the south pole. A place devoid of life itself," Falconer realised. "Great... so how do we get out of here?" he questioned, looking towards the cell bars. "We don't... we wait."