

A Promise of Fire

CHAPTER 1

I pluck at my crimson tunic, tenting the lightweight linen away

from my sticky skin. The southern Sintan climate isn't my worst nightmare, but it sometimes ranks pretty high, right along with the stifling layers of cosmetics masking my face, my leather pants, and my knee-high boots.

Heat and leather and heels don't mix, but at least looking like a brigand means blending into the circus. Here, discreet only gets you noticed.

Craning my neck for a breath of fresh air, I navigate my way through the beehive of tables already set up for the circus fair. The performers on the center stage are the main attraction. The rest of us surround them, carving out places for ourselves amid the crowd. Tonight, hemmed in on all sides in an amphitheater lit by hundreds of torches and filled to capacity, I feel like a Cyclops is sitting on my chest—suffocated.

Damp curls cling to my neck. I peel them off and tuck them back into my braid, scanning the crowd as I walk. I recognize some of the regulars. Others I don't know. My eyes trip over a man and get stuck. He's looking at me, and it's hard not to look back. He's striking in a dark, magnetic way, his size, weapons, and bearing all telling me he's a tribal warlord. His build is strong and masculine, his gait perfectly balanced and fluid. He walks with predatory confidence, unhurried, and yet there's no mistaking his capacity for swift, explosive violence. It's not latent or hidden, just leashed.

Watchful, alert, he's aware of everything in his vicinity. Especially me.

Our gazes collide, and something in me freezes. His eyes remind me of Poseidon's wrath—stormy, gray, *intense*—the kind of eyes that draw you in, hold you there, and might not let you go.

Adrenaline surges through me, ratcheting up my pulse. My heart thumping, I blink and take in the rest of him. Intelligent brow. Strong jaw. Wide mouth. Hawkish nose. Black hair brushes a corded neck atop broad shoulders that have no doubt been swinging a sword since before he could walk. Body toned to perfection, skin darkened by a lifetime in the sun, he's battle-chiseled and hard, the type of man who can cleave an enemy in two with little effort and even less consequence to his conscience.

He keeps staring at me, and a shiver prickles my spine. *Is this man my enemy?*

There's no reason to think so, but I didn't stay alive this long without the help of a healthy dose of paranoia.

Wary, I sit at my table, keeping an eye on him as he weaves a bold path through an array of potions, trinkets, and charms. He's flanked by four similar men. Their coloring varies, but they all have the same sure look about them, although they pale in comparison to the warlord in both authority and allure. The man with the gray eyes is a born leader, and only an idiot would mistake him for anything else.

He stares for so long that I start to wonder if he can somehow bore through my layers of face paint and unmask me, but I've never seen him before, and he can't possibly know the person underneath. I'm from the north of Fisa, where magic is might. He's from the south of Sinta, where muscle and cunning decide who lives or dies. Our paths would never have crossed in the past, and warlords don't usually frequent the circus.

I look away, hoping he'll do the same. There are plenty of reasons a man stares at a woman. An exotic face and generous figure attract as much attention as a good mystery, if not more, and the warlord's intense scrutiny feels more appreciative than alarming.

Ignoring the flush now creeping into my cheeks, I smooth the wrinkles from the coarse wool blanket covering my table and arrange my paraphernalia like usual. My glittering, gold-lettered sign advertises *Cat the Magnificent—Soothsayer Extraordinaire*, even though flashes of the future only come here and there, usually in dreams. Luckily, it only takes a few questions for truths to reveal themselves like flowers opening for the sun. I read people's body language and glean who they are, what they want, and maybe even what they're capable of. It's about knowledge and illusion. I get a copper for it, which is more than a fair deal for me. I won't peddle futures. I have an idea of my own, and that's more than enough.

My leg starts a nervous bounce. Prophecies can be interpreted loosely, right?

The audience gasps, and I turn to see what's happening on the stage. Vasili is throwing knives at his wife. She's strapped to the flat side of a vertical, rotating wheel, and he's blindfolded. He's never hit her, but my heart still comes to a complete standstill every time they perform. Tonight is no exception, and I hold my breath, both riveted and terrified, until he runs out of knives.

The crowd is too caught up in the circus to take advantage of the fair, so I get up again and head to the performers' gate to watch the end of the show and put some distance between the warlord and me. He's still looking when he shouldn't be.

The air coming through the gate is fresher, bringing with it the sound of Cerberus's chuffing breaths and the scent of sweaty dog. He's Hades's pet, so I doubt the heat bothers him. I toss him a wave, and two of his three upper lips curl in a snarl of acknowledgment. One of these days, I'll get all three, although in eight years I never have. I think his middle head just doesn't like me.

Finished with his performance, Vasili unstraps his wife while Aetos launches himself onto the stage with a triple flip and lands in a fighter's crouch that shakes the platform. The solid

wood creaks under his colossal weight, and the rapt crowd murmurs in awe. Aetos straightens, pounds his chest, tears the horse pelt off his giant back, and catches fire. His roar shakes the amphitheater. No one can roar like Aetos. I've seen him perform hundreds of times, and I still get chills.

Seven and a half feet tall, muscle-bound, and tattooed blue from head to toe with Tarvan tribal swirls, he moves his hands in an impossibly fast dance, weaving fire until he's encased in a sphere of living flame. He bursts through the crackling barrier with another roar. The explosion blasts the hair away from my face and dries out the inside of my nose. I'm forty feet away but feel like I'm in the furnaces of the Underworld. Fanning myself is useless. I'll never get used to the southern heat, and with Aetos performing, it's even worse.

The Sintan Hoi Polloi can barely contain themselves. It's like doing tricks for children—everything enchants. For them, the circus is a whirlwind of power and impossible magical de- lights. Everywhere from the hard-packed dirt floor surrounding the fair tables and stage to the high, far reaches of the circular stone seating, people jump up and down, hooting and stomping their feet.

My feet tap along with the crowd's, my eyes following Aetos around the stage. What a relief to be back in Sinta, even with all the dust and heat. I do whatever I can to stay on the west side of Thalyria. Our recent sojourn in the middle realm of Tarva made my lungs tight and my fingers itch for a knife. I'd probably start jumping at shadows if the circus ever went all the way east to Fisa. Just the thought of my home realm makes my sweat turn cold.

Sinta. Tarva. Fisa. West to east. Here to... Nothing I'm going to think about.

The audience whoops in approval of Aetos's fiery moves. Hoi Polloi in the amphitheater are ecstatic—and not only with the show. They've been celebrating ever since a warlord from the tribal south hacked his way north to Castle Sinta to put his own sister on the throne. You'd think Dionysus had dumped a three-month supply of wine over the entire realm. Temples have been overflowing with Sintans offering prayers of gratitude, their holy men overcome with gifts to help clothe and feed the poor. Statues of Athena, who is apparently well loved by the conquer- ing warlord, are being spontaneously erected in towns and vil- lages from here to the Ice Plains in Sinta's north. Happiness and generosity abound, and I don't even want to think about how many sheep have been slaughtered for celebratory feasts.

For the first time *ever*, the magicless majority is in charge, and Hoi Polloi are literally dancing in the streets—but only when they're not throwing themselves in abject loyalty at the feet of the new royal family. Or so I've heard. I haven't actually seen the new royals, but news spreads fast when there's some- thing to say. After the warlord and his southern army secured the Sintan throne during the spring, his family took weeks just to move north. Not because they're slow, but because of the sheer number of adoring people in their way.

It's no secret the northern-born Magoi royals here in Sinta were despots, just like everywhere else in Thalyria. Hoi Polloi know they're better off with one of their own in charge.

But royals without magic? My cynical snort is lost in the boisterousness of the crowd. *It'll never last.*

Sweeping the horsehide back over his shoulders, Aetos takes a mighty leap into the air and doesn't come back down. He hovers well above the open-air seating and shoots flames into the darkening sky. They drizzle down in a shower of sparks that char the raised wooden stage and add to the oppressive heat. He lands with the last of them, tramples a budding fire under his huge boot, roars, of course, and then takes a solemn bow.

I cover my ears, grinning. I might go deaf from the applause.

Aetos stomps to the exit in a swirl of black cape and red flame, nodding to me as Desma takes the stage for her Dance of a Thousand Colors.

She moves to the melody of a kithara, starting out slowly and building speed until she's whirling around the stage in a kaleidoscope of color. Her feet barely touch the ground. A rainbow shines from every pore, from every strand of hair and eyelash, illuminating summer's twilight with an impossibly complex brightness. Her eyes glow with more shades of color than even the gods have names for. Inconceivably beautiful, Desma is the grand finale, and the crowd worships her.

I'm as spellbound by Desma's dance as everyone else, and Vasili startles a squeak out of me when he nudges me in the ribs with the blunt end of a knife.

"You should be out there with her, Cat. Make a new act and call it the Fantastical Fisan Twins."

I whip the knife out of his hand, flip it, and nudge him back. "Twins look alike."

He looks back and forth between Desma and me. "Short. Long, dark hair. Bright-green eyes. Fisan."

Okay. He has a point. We're even the same age—twenty-three.

I sweep a hand down, indicating my curvaceous figure, and then point to Desma's much straighter frame.

Vasili grins, and his wide mustache spreads out, nearly meeting his bushy eyebrows on either side. "There is that. Desma should eat more."

I snort. "Or I should eat less."

"You're a woman, Cat. That's how you're supposed to look." I make a face at him. Vasili has

treated me like family since the day I showed up—fifteen years old, emaciated and dirty, with blisters all over my feet. “There’s nothing like starving to make a person appreciate food,” I say, my eyes roaming the place where I first saw Selena’s traveling circus in action. Eight years have passed, but this southern Sintan dust heap is still my favorite venue.

Vasili grabs his knife back and twirls the base of the hilt on his palm, spinning it on an imaginary axis.

I watch the whirling blade. “You know I wish I could do that.”

Smiling, he increases the speed until the knife is nothing but a blur.

“Show-off,” I grumble.

He chuckles, backing up so that Desma can make her way through the gate. She keeps moving, swaying rhythmically, and I turn to follow. We all know from experience that she can’t just stop, or the colors will build up inside her, the pressure unbearable. She takes my hands and spins me into her dance, our feet stirring dust into the shimmering air. We pass Cerberus on our way out, and one head pops up, ears twitching.

Desma’s colors skitter over me with tiny teeth, nipping at my skin. Her rainbows jump to me, eager, and I absorb them so fast the magic leaves me breathless and floating.

“You soothe me, Cat.” She guides us along the rough stone wall as we travel down the back side of the amphitheater. “You’re a balm to my soul.”

“I’m a bucket of water to your torch.”

She laughs at my tart response, colors pouring from her throat and sinking into me.

It doesn’t take long for Desma to stop glowing, and her power leaves me energized enough to forget the stifling heat. Rainbows fly from my fingertips, painting the evening shadows with splashes of color. I draw a picture of the Minotaur on the wall and then aim harmless ribbons of magic at friends who pass. Tadd and Alyssa launch into tumbling runs over the burned-out grass to avoid the beams. Zosimo and Yannis take my colorful volley head-on before staggering to the ground with imaginary wounds.

“Cat! You’re a menace!” Aetos booms from behind me.

Laughing, I whirl and hit him with everything I’ve got left. The magic can’t do more than tickle, but he acts like he’s on the glaciers again, pitting himself against the man-eating Mare of Thrace.

His face contorts, turning more menacing with every step. I eye his hulking form and the giant horsehide flapping behind him like dark wings and wish I’d braved the Ice Plains, defeated a monster, and made an offering like that mare’s head to the gods.

What did I do to deserve my magic, apart from survive?

Aetos wades through the color-thick air and then grabs me, crushing me in a bear hug. “Who’s laughing now?” he rumbles somewhere above my head.

“Too tight.” I gasp, the magic fizzling as my bones shift.

“Sorry.” He lets go, and I breathe again. His eyes, glacial blue like the Ice Plains, narrow when he gets a good look at me. “Zeus! You look like you’re forty.” He taps a finger against my cosmetic-layered nose. “Your face paints are so thick I can hardly see what’s under there.”

“That’s the idea,” I say with a cagey grin.

His expression sobers. “Who are you hiding from, Cat? Who are you?”

I clam up, humor draining from me like someone else’s magic. Aetos hasn’t looked at me like this in years. Not since he stopped asking where I ran from and why I scream at night.

I force a cocky smile. “I’m Cat the Magnificent. Soothsayer Extraordinaire.”

He doesn’t smile back, only letting me off the hook once he gives me a look that says he’s not done fishing. “Time to dazzle some Sintans, Cat the Magnificent. Soothsayer Extraordinaire.”

The tension I hate so much breaks when Desma pats my rump. “Either those pants shrank or you’re eating too many spice cakes again.”

I make a sound of disgust. “Why is everyone ganging up on me?”

She grins. “Because you’re weird, and nobody knows who you are.”

“My pants are fine.” Actually, they’re verging on truly un-comfortable, but I’m not about to admit it now.

Aetos crosses his arms, frowning. “They *are* too tight. If I see anyone looking at you for more than five seconds, I’ll tear his bloody head off his bloody body.”

My right eyebrow creeps up. “Then everything will be very bloody.”

“Laugh all you want,” he growls. “Just don’t get splashed.”

I make a sign to the gods on Olympus. “Grant me patience.” “Seriously, Cat.” Desma grabs my arm, unexpected urgency

in her grip. “Those face paints and that outfit make you look a lot older and more experienced than you are. Tread carefully in the crowd tonight.”

I roll my eyes. "I have done this before."

"I know." She releases me as abruptly as she grabbed me.

"But things are different in Sinta now, especially in the south. These people have realized that muscle *can* overcome magic. Hoi Polloi have been feeling feisty all spring and summer, and you wouldn't want to kill anyone by accident."

Everything in me stills. "What makes you think I can do that?"

Desma shrugs. Aetos looks way too interested, so I shift the focus to him.

"You can kill with fire."

"I can kill with one finger," he scoffs, snapping for good measure. "Fast, too."

Desma's small hands land on her narrow hips. "We're talking about magic, not obscenely overmuscled giants."

"Who are you calling obscene, rainbow woman?" Aetos's barrel chest heaves with indignation, thunderclouds gathering in his eyes.

"Stop!" I cut off their bickering before they have a chance to warm up. The Fates got everything backward with these two—a huge, tattooed southerner with fire and flight and a tiny demi-goddess with nothing to show for her Olympian heritage except rare beauty and a colorful glow. What a pair. I wish they would finally sleep together and get all the repressed emotion out in the open. "I have to go. My table's up."

Aetos winks. "Careful out there."

I shove him. It's like ramming my hand into a marble statue. "Why does everyone suddenly think I need protection? Didn't you just decide *I'm* the menace who can kill by accident?"

"So you can?" Desma asks.

I shake my head. "Of course not." I hate lying to my friends.

A boy with a berry ice in his hand and red dripping down his chin passes me three times before he finally stops.

I point to the chair across from me. "Sit."

Looking skittish, he lands on the edge of the seat. "Can you see my future?" he asks.

"Maybe." Never commit to something you probably can't do. I can try to have tea with Zeus. That doesn't mean I'll succeed.

His expression turns belligerent. "Does that mean you can't?"

“Let’s make a deal.” I lean forward, lowering my voice. “If you don’t think I do a good job, you don’t have to pay me.”

Hazel eyes sharpen, and he nods.

“Say it,” I prompt.

“It’s a deal.”

I sit back, satisfied. “What do you want to know?”

He shifts uncomfortably. His face, boyish and awkward now,

but promising to break hearts in a few years, scrunches up. I wait, trying to look patient until his question finally pops out.

“Will I ever have magic?”

I stifle a sigh. You’re either born with magic or you aren’t. Magoi or Hoi Polloi. It seems cruel to dash his hopes too fast, though. “Give me your hand.”

Trusting, he holds out his right hand.

I wipe my slippery palm on my leather pants, which does nothing, and then take his hand in mine. His is sticky with berry ice juice, and our hot skin fuses.

Palm reading is an ancient ritual, one that holds no bearing on anything whatsoever. You can’t read a damn thing from the lines on someone’s hand, but if the boy has even a tiny, glacial shard of the Ice Plains inside him, I’ll feel it. His power will want to come to me the same way mortals reach for the gods.

There’s nothing. He’s warm, sticky, and smells like kala- berries. His hand holds no power, although that doesn’t mean magic is forever out of his reach. I hesitate before sending him on a dangerous path. “Why do you want magic?”

His cheeks color. “I’ll never be as smart and strong as the tribal warlords. If I don’t have magic, I won’t have anything.”

That’s not true. He has a brain. He seems healthy. He can do anything he wants. The boy believes what he’s saying, though, or else my magic would react to the lie.

“Are you brave?” I ask.

He looks surprised. “I-I try to be.”

“Do you love your mother?”

He nods, his brow creasing at my question.

“Say it out loud,” I insist.

“I love my mother.”

“Is your family good to you?”

He starts to nod, and I raise a warning finger with my free

hand. I have to hear it. There's magic in spoken language. It's binding. There's a reason people ask for someone else's word. Every sentence a person utters can be a promise—or a betrayal.

"They're good to me," he answers.

A loving family. How novel.

"If you saw a child being beaten, would you walk away or would you intervene?"

His eyes widen. "But what could I do?"

"That doesn't answer the question." A hard edge creeps into my voice, and he pales.

Note to self: Don't scare children.

His shoulders straighten. "I would intervene."

I brace for a ripping in my soul. Surprisingly, none comes. He's told me the truth, which makes him worthy of my advice. He's also courageous and has a family that will support him, which means he might actually survive it.

"The gods favor kindness and selflessness." Some do at least, and despicable people like Cousin Aarken get chomped. *Ha!*

"Under the right circumstances, goodness and honesty can be rewarded."

The boy looks confused. "I have to be good and ask the gods for magic?"

I sit back, releasing his hand. "Yes, but you can't just go to the temples, pray, and say, 'please, please.' It doesn't work that way. You have to prove yourself. When you're older, wiser, and much stronger, choose either the Ice Plains or the lake oracles."

"You mean go north." His freckled nose wrinkles in distaste.

"That's where the magic is. Here, we're so far from Olympus that it's weak and diluted in the people who possess any at all. Even Magoi have trouble this far south. It's harder for most of us to wield our power."

"Most?"

I wink conspiratorially. "Most."

The boy chews on his berry-stained lip with teeth that are

white and straight. "Which should I choose?"

He's so earnest that something in my chest tightens. I'm

pointing him toward vicious magical creatures or oracle fish the size of dragons. What if I'm sending him to his death?

"You have to be very strong to survive the Ice Plains. The oracles are capricious but usually the safer bet."

He nods, storing the information away. I should charge two coppers for this kind of thing, especially in southern Sinta. There's more ignorance of magic and history here than anywhere else in Thalyria.

"Which lake?" he asks.

Make that three coppers. Maybe even four...

"That's your choice, and it depends on which god you want protecting you." I pitch forward and then say in a low voice, "But if you're anywhere near Fisa and you see Poseidon's three-tentacled trout, tell it Catalia says hello."

I draw back, alarmed. *What in the Underworld?* I don't blurt things out. I don't just hand over information about myself that I've never told my friends, including my full name.

The boy's eyes go as round as clay pots. "You've been to an oracle?" he says far too loudly.

My stomach lurches while I wonder when I stopped being in control of my own mouth.

Damn meddling gods. What do they want with this kid? Or worse—with me?

I reluctantly nod. "And came out the right end. Not the back," I clarify. I don't even want to think about being digested by a giant fish. "Oracles will look you in the eye, poke around in your head, and then taste you. If you're lucky, they'll help you. If you're not worthy, they'll swallow you whole."

He pales. "Eat...people?"

"Even oracles need to eat. I have a cousin who found that out the hard way."

The boy's jaw practically hits my table.

"Oh, he deserved it," I assure him. Mother knew Aarken and I were rivals and informed me with her usual cruelty and disappointment that I should have taken care of him before the oracle did. Kill or be killed—the family motto.

"You're amazing." The boy sounds breathless.

I laugh. Sort of. "Everyone thinks so."

He grins at my obvious humility and starts digging around

in his pocket for a copper.

“Keep it,” I tell him. “Buy yourself another berry ice and

bring one back for me.” It’s so hot I’m tempted to let one melt down the back of my neck, but I’m sticky enough as it is.

“Thanks!” He grins even wider.

I hope the information I’ve revealed about myself remains between us. His smile is charming, and I don’t want another enemy. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” he answers proudly.

It’s only a small deception. Pain still rips my soul. Flames sear me from the inside, igniting in my core and lashing out to char my bones. I lock my body down, holding still until the burning passes.

“You’re eleven,” I say coolly. “Why would you lie?”

His face falls, and he stares at his feet. “I wanted to impress you.” “Lies never impress.” I try not to grit my teeth and scare

him. “Remember that when you see the oracle, or you might come out the wrong end.”

He nods without looking up.

Sweat breaks out on my upper lip. A bead of moisture slips down my spine. Between the southern climate and the boy’s lie, someone’s going to have to peel me out of my pants. I hope Desma’s up for the job.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Jason.” He’s still hanging his head.

“Go get me that berry ice, Jason of Sinta. I’m melting in this heat.”

He flashes me a relieved smile and then dashes off.

I lean back in my chair, fanning myself and longing for the cool north, a view of the Ice Plains, and a way to take back certain parts of what I just said. At least the kid doesn’t realize it’s important. Poseidon and Fisa are worlds away to a southern Sinta boy. Catalia doesn’t mean anything to him.

I’m just starting to convince myself that my unprecedented slipup wasn’t so colossal when a deep voice rumbles behind me, making me start.

“The gods don’t favor kindness and selflessness. They favor strength and courage.”