

## *Game of Strength and Storm*

### Chapter 1

#### Gen

Gen had grown accustomed to wearing soggy boots. A small price to pay for low cost, efficient sea travel. Crossing the ocean by whale truly was the best way to do it, and she normally didn't mind her cold, wet feet, or the salt stains on her pants, or the smell of fish that clung to her, or bits of seaweed that tangled in her hair. Today, though, she would have preferred something a little drier.

Another glob of fish guts dropped from the roof of the infinity whale's mouth onto the shoulder of her jacket. Under the luminescent glow of his skin, the fish guts left a glimmering, blue smear on her sleeve. "Can you please swim more carefully?" she asked him.

*Can you please swim more carefully?* he snapped back, the retort ringing very clearly in her mind through their shared, mental connection with just the right amount of petulance.

This was a new trick he'd learned, to mock her, and Gen couldn't completely blame him for it. Whales were whales. They did whale things. Every annoying human trait he had, he had learned from her. She would have to watch her mouth around him. And her thoughts, which was harder to do.

She brushed the fish scales from her sleeve. She didn't usually invest in new clothes for this reason. She'd spent two days uncovering a nest of slumber bees on the island of Hypnos to earn the coins for this jacket.

A tavern on the isle had been completely infested with the bugs, and anyone who tried to find the source of the hive quickly dropped off into insect-induced narcolepsy when they were inevitably stung. The tavern owner needed a MindWorker, someone like Gen who could simply

ask the bees why they were congregating in the bar. It turned out the queen bee had been trapped under the floorboards. Once Gen freed the queen, the bees left, she collected her sack of coins and went to the nearest tailor to find something nice to wear.

This jacket, which currently looked like it had been dredged from the inside of a fish barrel.

“Why do I even try?” she asked Chomp.

The squat, round purple-haired mutt by her foot didn’t stir. He had found a soft, warm patch of whale flesh to sleep in when they left Hypnos and he hadn’t moved since. She nudged Chomp in the ribs, and he flopped onto her pants. Some of his purple hair stuck to the salt water on her hem, adding to the mess.

She threw her arms in the air. “I give up.”

“Play the part,” her father had always said in their circus. “Show them the dream, not the reality.”

Gen’s life had never been perfect, but it had been much closer to it when her parents had been alive. In Alcmen’s Amazing Animals, the most acclaimed circus in all of Olympia, they’d hidden the loose strings behind the curtains, covered the patches on their costumes with sequins, and hung banners across the tent walls to conceal the holes.

They’d had a ship then to travel from island to island, city to city, show to show. A beautiful ship with a carving of Gen’s own mother on the prow. On the Scylla, whale slobber hadn’t been an issue. Gen had slept in her own cabin with a closet full of fine jackets, boots, and dresses protected from the whale who swam alongside the ship. Their other creatures roamed the decks. Gen often awoke to chatter squirrels under her bed or chameleon monkeys scurrying across her ceiling.

Everything had been in perfect, chaotic order.

The whale gave a short whine, and Gen snapped her head upright. *We're here.* He sent the message through their mental connection.

*Thank you,* she sent back.

He flipped his tail and they rose upward. Gen could already feel the pressure release from inside the whale's mouth. His blowhole opened, and he sprayed rotten fish bones into the air. They lifted out of the water, and the whale wriggled his tail to push them into the shallows. He yawned his mouth wide, sea water flowing from the top of his jaw, and Gen blinked in the brilliant sun.

It had been a while since she'd been to the great isle of Athenia. The capital of all one hundred Olympian isles and the home of the Empresses sat in the southeast quadrant of the Empire. Gen usually took great care to avoid it and kept to the other isles, clinging to the outskirts like an unwanted pest.

As long as she didn't bother anyone, they usually didn't bother her, and she was tolerated when they needed something of her—like someone to clear out a hive of slumber bees.

It did not used to be that way.

Her father had once been the best MindWorker in the world. With a few drops of blood or some plucked hairs, he could control an entire ship full of creatures. Gen and her family had been as close to royalty as people with no lineage could be, revered for their skill. Little had any of them known their downfall had been planned long before they'd been born.

A thousand years ago Hippolyta, Queen of the Mazons, scorned her Gargarean lover. The leader of the Gargareans declared war, and the silver-skinned women warriors and the golden

brutes had been fighting for centuries. Four years ago, it all came to an end with the Gargareans annihilating the entire Mazon race . . . including Gen's mother.

Three months later, Gen's father had been arrested outside of a tavern, covered in blood, with a room full of dead Gargareans behind him. The tavern owner testified before the Empresses that Alcmen had been the one to kill them.

*"He came into my bar and started spraying the Gargareans with his own blood. Once he did that, the Gargareans turned on themselves. But he made them do it . . . I saw it."*

This was the piece that didn't quite fit because Gen had the same ability as her father—somewhat. She didn't have his level of control, but she had to adhere to the same rules.

*"You never use mind magic on people."*

It had been Alcmen's personal mantra, and he had instilled it in Gen repeatedly, not purely for the ethics behind it, but because it was difficult to control a sentient being. It became a game of will versus will, and if the subject had stronger will than the MindWorker, they could turn the connection.

Other factors also came into play: the skill of the MindWorker, the stubbornness of the subject, and the matter being influenced.

Gen's father possibly had the strength and skill, but the Gargareans were the most stubborn race in all of Olympia. They had fought a thousand-year war, and trying to convince someone to kill themselves or one of their friends would require mass amounts of blood and influence.

So, for things to happen the way the tavern owner claimed they had, Alcmen's desire to kill the Gargareans would have had to outmatch their desire to live. He also would have had to

feed each of them a cup full of his blood without fainting from weakness, and temporarily suspend all of his morals to do so.

If all of those conditions were met, he maybe, possibly, could have done it.

But he hadn't. Gen knew it with every piece of her soul. Not that it mattered what she thought. When Alcmen went down, he took all MindWorkers with him, and Gen fell the hardest. She was the daughter of a convicted murderer, one with the same ability. She might as well have been imprisoned with him.

At thirteen, she had become an orphan and an exile. And for the past four years, she had entered her name in the Olympian Empresses' annual lottery. The Empresses were the only ones who could overturn Alcmen's conviction, and they would only grant her the request if she won the lottery. Without them, she had no other options except to live forever in exile while her father rotted in prison.

This year, she had finally been chosen. She could make one wish of the esteemed rulers, and she would wish to free her father and clear their names. They would get their ship back and their circus and start rebuilding their lives together.

"Time to wake up." She nudged Chomp with her boot, and her purple chaeri yawned with a mouthful of pointed teeth.

She picked up her bag and pulled three black hairs from the top of her head. She felt a small patch of bare skin there. Whoops. She had to be more careful about varying her pulls. Thankfully, she'd gotten a new hat to go with the jacket.

She removed it from her bag, placed it on her head, and dropped the three hairs onto the whale's tongue. As soon as she did, the whale sent her a surge of emotion. Hunger, for one. Not a surprise. He couldn't eat while Gen and Chomp were in his mouth, not without drowning them.

“Go get yourself something to eat,” she said to him. “I’ll call when I need you.”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and whistled to Chomp. They walked across the whale’s spongy tongue. Ducking under the curtain of water running off the whale’s mouth, she stepped into the shallows, sea water soaking into her boots.

A small crowd had gathered on the beach to admire the whale. Infinity whales didn’t usually come into water this shallow. They kept to the deep where they could catch the most fish and stay hidden from whale hunters.

Even though it was illegal to kill the whales, poachers roamed the sea. It was said drinking the blood of an infinity whale could make you live forever.

Not true.

It might extend a few years, reduce a few wrinkles, but it couldn’t make someone immortal. Still, people would pay quite a bit of coin for the promise of those extra years.

Most people, however, like the ones gathered on the beach, simply wanted to see an infinity whale. In the sunlight, Gen’s whale glimmered blue and yellow, like the surface of the water at sunset. Gen and her family used to arrive in every town this way, emerging from inside the whale’s mouth to an eager crowd. The people would cheer and clap, hoot and howl. For some, it was their first time seeing the circus. For others, it was their hundredth time.

But now, as Gen emerged from the whale, no one clapped, no one cheered. Some gasped, some shrieked, some glared. She sighed. It was a stupid thought, but she always held some infinitesimal bit of hope that she would show up somewhere and no one would recognize her, or hate her.

Since Alcmén’s greatness had reached so far, when he dropped from his pedestal, he left a great dent behind. Gen and all MindWorkers had become something like a walking poison. The

people expected her to start spraying them with blood and forcing them to murder one another. She couldn't even begin to discuss how vile or impossible that was.

"Come on, Chomp." She waved the chari forward, and the lingering crowd parted to let her pass.

"Disgusting," someone whispered. "They should all be jailed."

"Monster," someone else said, not as quietly.

Gen tugged her hat lower and sank into the collar of her jacket, yanking the sleeves over the silver bands on the backs of her hands. They made her too recognizable. The only race in all of Olympia with silver coloring had been the Mazons, who were all dead thanks to the Gargareans. The Mazon-ness she'd earned from her mother were the last pieces of an entire race, and a beacon pointing out her existence.

"Don't look at her," a woman said and dragged her child away by the wrist.

Gen raised her chin and walked faster, choking down her agony. She had shone in the circus, adored by all. Surrounded by all this hate, she dulled to an abysmal gray. After today, though, they would have to stop hating her. Once the Empresses recanted Alcmen's sentence and set everything right, they would declare to all of Olympia that MindWorkers were safe.

And no one defied the Empresses. Not if they enjoyed breathing.

Gen marched quickly toward the palace through the colorful booths, performers, guests, and attendants all here in honor of the Empresses' birthday. In the center of it all sat a large, blue and white striped tent. Gen swallowed hard.

Her family used to perform inside that tent, every year on the Empresses' birthday as far back as she could remember. Except the past four years.

She kept walking, past the man swallowing fire and the dancers who swung from colorful vines, then to the food booths. She hesitated when she breathed in something sweet—small, frosted pink cakes on sticks. Grouseberry pops. Oh how she missed those!

The woman selling them tried to hide behind the counter when she saw Gen, but would she outright refuse to sell her one? If she wanted her to go away, the fastest way would be to give her a cake and send her off.

“He’s so cute.” A little girl with bright, pink skin and red pigtails knelt next to Chomp, hand outstretched.

“No,” Gen shouted as Chomp snapped at the girl with a mouthful of razor teeth.

The girl yanked her hand back and burst into sobs.

“Sorry,” Gen called. “Sorry.” Too late. The girl scampered up to two adults, one of them quite large and menacing, and not appearing to be at all afraid of Gen or her temperamental chaeri.

“Time to go.” She grabbed Chomp by the scruff and dragged him toward the palace bridge. “If you don’t behave yourself,” she said through her teeth, “I’ll feed you a cup of my blood and force you to cuddle every person here.”

Blood was a more effective tool than hair; that part of the rumors about MindWorkers was true. With blood, she could control her unruly chaeri . . . not a room full of Gargareans. She’d stopped influencing Chomp years ago. She thought they’d reached an understanding. She wouldn’t feed him hair. He wouldn’t bite children.

“That’s her,” someone else said as she passed. “The murderer’s daughter.”

Gen clutched Chomp under her arm and hurried to the palace. The sooner she made her wish, the sooner she could end this.



She stopped at the edge of the bridge, taking in the entirety of the sleek, golden spire of the Empresses' tower. They called it the Beacon of Olympia. The four pillar stones at the entrance were each marked with a diamond shape to represent the four Oracles who had formed Olympia more than ten-thousand years ago.

Hecate, Oracle of the Spirit; Tarturus, Oracle of the Sky; Ponos, Oracle of the Earth; and Keres, Oracle of the Mind. The four Oracles gave Gen and others their abilities. Even before Alcmen's downfall, people had been wary of MindWorkers.

Keres, the Oracle attributed to Gen's gift, had once taken a human lover. He then fell in love with her sister, Hecate. Feeling betrayed, Keres sent a chimera to eat Hecate and the human. When her brothers, Ponos and Tartarus retaliated, she invaded their minds and turned them against one another. They murdered each other, and Keres, once she had seen what she had done, killed herself in grief.

Images of her were always depicted with sharp teeth and claws, and her story was told as a warning against wickedness.

Gen didn't want to be the villain. She wanted to be the star.

"Let's do this," she said to Chomp and took her first step toward salvation when a boom of thunder shook the stones.

Gen grit her teeth and slowly turned her eyes to the sky. A golden chariot looped through the clouds, pulled by two winged horses dressed in jeweled bridals and plumed headdresses. At the helm of the chariot stood a woman with pale white hair, snow drop skin, and a glittering cape flowing behind her. Lightning crackled in the palm of her hand, the light of it glinting off of her perfect smile.

"Of course," Gen whispered. The Storm Duke's daughter.

The StormMakers had played a part in Gen's downfall too. Gifted with the power of storms from the Oracle Tartarus, they'd always had a bit of an ego on their shoulders. At ten years old, Gen had performed a show for the Arcadian court, her first solo act with Chomp. She'd made him a special hat with bells to match her own. She'd practiced their act for hours, and it had gone flawlessly. He'd climbed the wire, leapt through the hoop of flames, and landed safely in her arms.

Everyone in the audience had cheered, except for one—Lady Castor. While people clapped and begged for more, the young Lady sat in her gilded chair and yawned.

As if that weren't enough, two years later, the Storm Duke sold a large supply of bottled lightning, rain, and thunder to the Gargareans. They used the bottles to destroy the island of Mazon, cooking the residents with lightning, and drowning them in floods and mudslides, which stole Gen's mother from her and put her father in prison for murder.

If she *could* control someone with her blood, she would feed it to the StormMakers and make them burn themselves with lightning to pay for what they'd done to her, to all of Mazon.

Castor's carriage landed in the center of the festivities, and a crowd quickly gathered. Castor pulled a small vial from the belt on her hip, opened the top, and a rainbow burst forth, spilling over the people in reds and yellows and blues.

They clapped and cheered, oohed and aahed, and Gen fought the urge to tear out her hair and scream. They clapped for the daughter of a man who sold genocide while they cursed at Gen. The hypocrisy stuck in her teeth like Aurelian taffy.

Besides, the StormMaker gifts weren't theirs alone. They'd found a way to bottle and sell their magic. Anyone could buy a jar of StormMaker rainbows and produce the same feat. But

Gen's kind of magic couldn't be shared, and maybe that was why the people hated her for having it. Because they couldn't.

