

*Lindsay Townsend*

***BRONZE LIGHTNING – Excerpt***

*Krete, c.1562 BC. Summer.*

Sarmatia spun away and was gone, somersaulting over her hands and landing with a soft clash of gold ankle bells. Their meeting of eyes had lasted no more than a breath, yet it kept returning to haunt her as the music shrilled to a climax and the piebald bull was let into the court. Even as the flute players left and the Bull Rite began, her gaze was drawn to the back of the courtyard.

Three of the seven had completed their Passage and two were gone: the fourth initiate should have been ready. As the bull came to a jolting stop at one end of the court, pawed restively and licked the painted flags, Sarmatia motioned to a creamy-skinned, gray-eyed girl. The youngster backed up a step. The bull raised its head, its horn scraping against a pillar. The girl blanched and looked wildly about, ready to run. In three strides Sarmatia made up the space between them and gripped her arm. Unseen by the families, she pressed the flat of her dagger into the initiate's side. Cruel to be kind, she threatened.

'This or the bull if you show your back, Pero!' she whispered, turning the blade for the girl to feel its edge. 'The only way out is through the horns.' Whatever Sarmatia's private disgust and unease, custom and the crowd demanded it. They would not forgive Pero if she failed.

'I can't!' Pero was shaking and near tears. A low murmur ran around the watching crowd like a wind through barley: the mob and the bull would not wait much longer. Pierced by pity, Sarmatia squeezed the girl's thin shoulder. 'Do you want to be a child all your life?' she asked gently.

'Sarmatia, I can't! Those horns, they're like knives, and the bull— Oh, Mother!' Pero's voice cracked. 'It's looking for me!' The bull had trotted out of the shadows at the back of the courtyard.

Sarmatia stepped in front of Pero, shielding the girl. 'Look, it's nothing.' She ran forward, clapping her hands.

The bull halted and its head slewed round towards them, a brown forelock covering one eye. 'To me!' she shouted.

The beast dropped its great horns. She heard the people applaud. With an explosion of dust the bull charged. She felt its hot, closed mind surrounding her. For an instant skill deserted her. She remembered she was too old for the Bull Rite. A blaze of gold spilled from the bull's horns, instinct returned and with it sureness. She caught the horns and let herself rise. Time and the horizon fell back, she could see the blue vault of heaven, the red-mouthed 'O' of the crowd, a flash of red-gold hair as Fearn turned his head, following her descent. Her feet touched the bony rump of the bull, she tucked in her arms and somersaulted off, running forward as she landed.

Behind her the beast gave a sulky grunt, swept this way and that with its horns and lashed its tail. Pero worked her way into its sight, swaying her hips to keep quick and supple. The piebald ambled off in the opposite direction then suddenly spun about and bore down on the girl in another burst of speed. Sarmatia moved to cover Pero's tumble

and signalled to the remaining initiates to do the same. She heard the girl seize the bull's horns, with a great smack on each palm, and saw her tossed, arching like a dolphin in mid-air and rising clear of the deadly gilded horns. The time of peril would be when the girl landed. If Pero caught an ankle or winded herself, Sarmatia knew she would have to be in quickly to distract the beast.

There was a shower of dark hair and Pero touched earth to a roar from her family. Sarmatia grabbed her arm and pulled her clear, but was not fast enough: already the bull had skidded round. Too late, Sarmatia realized what the beast had seen. A child had kicked a hole in the fencing and was running out into the turbid afternoon light. No time to draw the bull off— all she could hope for was to reach the boy first. Sprinting, her insides turning to water, Sarmatia rushed for the child. As her hands closed round his tiny—so tiny!—body and her cheek grazed the stones she thought, with terrible clarity: I promised they would be safe. I've failed. For a second, a dark breathing shadow hung over her. Then came pain, the slow tearing punch of the horn.

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She came awake suddenly, crying out. Firm hands kept her flat against the stones. 'Peace, Kretan,' said the man crouched beside her, pressing a cloth onto the spurting wound in her side. 'There's nothing to fear.' In the sun his hair framed his broad-featured face like a nimbus, yet there was darkness behind him. The bull was still free in the courtyard.

Sarmatia wet her lips with her tongue. 'The child?' Fearn jerked his head to one side. 'Ramosé has taken his son. He's safe.' The initiates were also gone, the crowd hanging back, uncertain what to do. They were alone in the court, except for the bull. Fearn pressed on her side again then withdrew the cloth. A dark spiral of blood pooled under Sarmatia's ribs; blood no longer pumped from the wound. She scarcely felt it as he bound the gash with a bandage made from his tunic. 'You must leave, Sir, the bull—'

She broke off, eyes widening, and Fearn whipped round. Ready to gore, the bull was lowering its huge head, its face so close that its breath stirred the bristles of Fearn's beard. Fearn threw up an arm to fend off the horns and drove a fist into the face of the beast. 'Get back!' He hit the creature a second time. 'Learn your lesson!'

The bull snorted and the healer shifted, covering Sarmatia completely with his body. He stamped the stones and shouted at the beast. 'Go on! Go on!'

As Fearn's boot hammered the flags, there came the rumble of a distant storm, like the muffled roar of a lion. The beast started back and with a bellow turned tail and ran.