

Capital Vices

A very long time ago, once every harvest moon in the large but lush village of Zotikos, people from the surrounding towns would come together in a truce. During said time, there is much feasting, trading, and festivities that many, young and old, would participate in. Dancing, singing, crafting, and athletics are all held to see who is the lightest, the talented, the skilled, and the strongest. Out of all the days the sun rises and falls, the truce is the most feared time of the year. Though the riots have stopped, and the sword fighting has suspended, no amount of peace could be enjoyed with the looming competition that made children shrink away and adults cringe. A clash of metal upon stone, a rush of hooves upon sand, and a crack of unforgiving twine upon flesh made a symphony of chaos that came to be known as The Race of the Chariots.

These trials would begin at the end of the glorious day when the ruler's bellies were full of mead, and the poor had their fair share of kykeon at the lift of the moon. Ribbons of countrymen would flood into a capacious granite stadium meant to house thousands upon thousands of drunken fur sellers and lively farm men. One can't fathom who might want to see such an unnerving challenge; however, it was the most exciting out of all the daily events. None of the other matches were as hot-blooded as the Races of the Chariots would ever be. It was this competition that decided which of the towns was the best of them all.

During a time when the fighting of the towns seemed most hysterical, the tiny village of Ambrosios had finally come to an agreement as to who would race for them at the upcoming harvest moon. The village was full of able-bodied men but none of them wanted to put their life on the line in a savage tournament. After many days of countless bickering, two brave men stepped forward. A seventeen year old named Kyros and an eighteen year old named Klemes.

Kyros was the first son of the king, strong and quick, what he lacked in comprehension, he made up for it with skill and although he was said to be the strongest man alive, he was also the rudest. Wealthy and pig-headed, the juvenile was feared among his peers as he was more reckless than a young bull. Kyros also believed that if anybody was to win a challenge, it would be himself and no other. Never had the young

prince ever lost a brawl, a gamble, or a game and so, many saw him as immortal as a God.

Klemes was the opposite. The young adult was born into the life of a farmer raising sheep, goats, and pigs, as well as harvesting the vegetables for the local stand his grandfather owned. Living a simple life, he became well-known and respected among the village. He was an honest minor, often bringing left over crops to the poor or breaking up fights outside the local bar. Although Klemes was just as strong as the mighty Kyros, he refused to boast about his ability to plow a whole cabbage field in less than a few hours. He was very modest, not accepting compliments and kindnesses just like his father taught him. He was voted to participate in the races by the villagers. They meant him not to get hurt, but to bring glory to their small town.

Their mounts were nothing but the best. Timaious, named for his honorable stature and glorious ebon color, he was faster than an arrow launched by a bow. Also temperamental the young stallion was difficult to restrain. His draft size made him a difficult and fidgety horse. The other voted for was Tryphosa, a young mare noted for her delicate and silky gray coat. She was agile and very light on her feet as she crossed fields of fallen trees and rocky mountainsides.

As the 11th of Októvrios approached, all the villagers closed their shops, packed a few necessities, and made their hike through the forest to Zotikos. The past rivalries with the neighboring villages had ceased and everybody was welcoming and pleasant. While the merriment began, Klemes and Kyros found themselves meeting their competitors. Klemes greeted the friendly with a shake of hands and a grin on his face while Kyros boasted to the others, claiming that he would be the one to take home the riches to his already wealthy family. Puffing out his chest and wearing a smirk, he said aloud, “It will be satisfying to see all of you in pieces on the track while I wear the robes of honor and gaze upon your lifeless corpses.”

As the fights caused by the young prince in the competitors lounge died down, the sun had taken its last few breathes as it descended beneath the tree-line. Kyros had been joined by his decorated stallion, Timaious, while Klemes met his frost gray mare, Tryphosa. Each of the beasts had their manes roached to their necks, and wore a dark lavender feather weaved into the throat latches of their leads. While the chariots were

being hooked up to the large harnesses, the harold began his opening speech overhead. Klemes fidgeted with the leather, desperately trying to hurry up while Kyros watched and scorned.

“Why are you here if you know nothing about these beasts? Are you not a mere livestock farm boy used to dealing with such creatures? You will wind up dead on the track for sure. Not that it matters if you survive or not to me though. We all know who is strongest and has the fastest stallion in all of Ambrosios. Your feeble white mare will never stand a chance. She is too small, too weak to race in a competition like this one.” Kyros mocked as he stood in his cart gripping his black leather reins tightly in his gloved hands.

“I am not one to oppose you, my prince. However, have you never made an honest living in your life? You already have everything that can be obtained, yet you wish to take a title away from citizens that have worked for their daily share of gruel. Why must you try and try again to be the best at all? Far more people here deserve glory rather than a prince who is more obstinate than a mule.” Klemes responded as he gave the white mare a pat on her shoulder.

“How dare you, you inferior peasant? Thou have no respect for those of higher authority. Do you not comprehend who I am and the power I withhold? I can have your head ripped clean from your shoulders at your talk of defilement!” The younger teen snarled. Klemes only shrugged.

“I do not defile you, my prince. I speak in truth. Have I offended you, I offer my sincere apology. However, one day, you will learn...”

“Once we are back in our hometown and you have either lost or suffered erasure, I will be quite sure to have your small farm obliterated. Your vile pets will be drowned and your precious crops will be plucked from the very ground they are rooted in. Protest will result in execution. You hold no rights to speak to me as such!” Kyros exclaimed as he watched Klemes ride into the torch light of the arena.

When all the racers had lined up, the crowd was a chorus of shouts, insults, and cheers. The horses sighed, snorted, and stomped their powerful feet against the sand as their riders held them back with tight reins. Some of the creatures snapped their teeth and reared angrily at their competitors beginning the start of the bloodshed.

“Riders, get ready!” The harold howled and the crowd went dead silent. The coliseum was still with the faint sound of crickets chirping behind the walls of stones. Kyros clenched his fists and licked his dry lips from the sand as he jerked his reins back to stop Timaious’ attempt to bite the chestnut mare beside him. Klemes took a deep breath and closed his eyes. As a gust of wind filled the stadium, the harold looked up at the sky to see the moon begin to peek up from the horizon. At its appearance, he blew into the bellowing horn and in a crack of twine whips and squeal of wooden wheels, the competition began. Racer shouted and whistled as the horses grunted and pulled on closer to first turn pole. Kyros ushered strong while Klemes tugged his leads slightly to allow his mare to slow down before crashing into the stone wall. Timaious skidded a bit at the turn but he found his footing and pushed forward passing a racer with a green chariot and a piebald stallion. Fourth place wasn’t good enough for the prince so he cracked the whip against the black stallion’s flank, a deep gash being its only aftermath.

Klemes fell behind in twelfth place. Not last, but far from first, he snapped the twine in the air, careful not to touch the silk of the horse’s coat. Tryphosa nickered and galloped faster while her beautiful coat turned brown with dust. The next thing he heard was the ear splitting noise of metal dragged across stones. The farm boy watched helplessly as a dark bay horse skidded to her side, tipping the chariot and her rider over. In a flurry of hooves, the older man’s life was taken underfoot of the sprinting beasts. The mare couldn’t move so she laid on her side and waited to join her mutilated partner.

The crowd exploded into cheers at the gruesome sight before them. Kyros only laughed at his fallen competitor. Now in third, he allowed his horse to run and slow for the next turn. Without a real issue, he neared the ending line with eleven more laps to conquer. Not even a sweat had broken the ebon beast. He let out a laugh and gripped his leads tighter as blood trickled down the horse’s flank and through his white teeth.

The race ran up and down the track with victims falling at unexpected moments leaving only three competitors left able to race. Kyros had taken the lead as a rider with an orange chariot raced fast at his heels. Klemes held the back with his white mare panting and chewing on her copper bit, her gray muzzle soaked in foam. She had proved herself to be very agile on her turns, able to take them faster than any of the other horses could manage. But she lacked endurance and speed and was slowly losing ground as

they passed the 11th lap. Ahead, he could see the orange charioteer also slowing, his chestnut lead limping now as the tight turning was getting to his knees leaving them red and raw. However, Kyros still pushed strong his horse showing no means of tiring. At the last leg, the orange rider cracked his whip. His chestnut, ignoring his aching pain, attempted to pass the black roaring stallion. Furious, Kyros tugged on one of his horse's reins slowly closing his opponent to the granite wall. Sparks flew up from the chariot as the sound of metal cracked and bent under the increased pressure. The chestnut, broken under his panic, fell to the ground on his sore knees, crimson staining his sweat drenched coat.

Kyros flew past the finish line and brought his horse to a gentle trot as the crowd burst out into noise. A few moments later, Klemes followed right up behind, the white mare heaving but shimmering by the torch light.

“Kyros of the town of Ambrosios has won the Race of the Chariots! The prince has done it as the youngest to finish this dangerous trial!” The harold yelled over the screaming standbys.

Basking in his glory, absorbing his praise, Kyros almost did notice one member of the audience protesting the loudest.

“It was against the rules! He broke a law! Kyros is nothing but a cheater!” The man in the crowd said wickedly. Everyone else grew quiet.

“Are you daft? I have won this race fair yet you challenge me? I am the prince of Ambrosios. I can have you executed with your talk of blasphemy!” Kyros barked.

“You knew you couldn't beat the chestnut so you swindled. How unjust! How unfair! What an act of deception! Does this not break a fair law? Hear me people as I encourage you to see the error of Kyros' ways!”

The harold looked at the man and then at Kyros. There was a hush of whispers among the crowd which turned into cheers of savagery.

“Punish the young prince!” One man beckoned.

“Destroy the young prince!” Another screamed.

“Let his blood be spilled!” More clamored.

“Attention everybody!” The harold called for silence. “I agree with you all. This young prince must be demolished. Here and now. Unharness the black stallion and the gray mare!”

The crowd frenzied.

As Kyros finally realized the sincerity of their words, attempting to escape became impossible. Timaious and Tryphosa were relieved of their chariots and now hooked up to a harness with a single rope attached to the withers.

“No... No you mustn't do this! I am a fair prince! I have done no wrong! Klemes is the worthless one! You cannot murder a royal!” Kyros cried out as he was pushed onto the ground and held down forcefully. One rope was tied to his right arm and the other to his left.

“Stop! At the expense of the king! You will all be beheaded! All of you! I swear by it!”

At the crack of a whip, the horses raced in opposite directions as the crimson red moon above shined down on the bloodstained field below.