

SHE WHO
FOUGHT

Legendary woman in
battle

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To all the women throughout history whose stories were never
told,
To those who fought, resisted, and rose above despite being
forgotten,
And to those who, today, continue the fight for equality, freedom,
and justice.

 May your courage inspire,

May your voices echo,

And may your legacy never fade

Introduction

Throughout history, the stories of those who shaped our world have often been told through the lens of power and conquest, with the deeds of great men filling the pages of our collective memory. But there is another history—a quieter, often forgotten history, woven from the courage of women who rose above the roles assigned to them. This book is about such women—women who fought, who led, and who challenged the empires of their time.

From the vast steppes of ancient Asia to the bustling streets of medieval cities, these women emerged as powerful forces of change. They lived in different times, spoke different languages, and faced different enemies, but they shared something fundamental: a determination to defy expectations and an unyielding will to protect what they held dear. Zenobia, Joan of Arc, Tomyris, Mulan—each of them defied the conventions of their time, stepped forward where others retreated, and wielded not only weapons but also their indomitable spirit.

In a world that often tried to silence them, they made their voices heard on the battlefield, in the courts of kings, and in the hearts of their people. Their courage was not only physical—it was a courage that came from a deep belief in something greater than themselves. It was a belief in freedom, in justice, and in the ability to shape one's own destiny. This book aims to honor these women, to bring their stories back into the light, and to celebrate their extraordinary lives.

The stories that follow take the reader on a journey across continents and centuries. You will stand beside Boudica as she leads her warriors against the might of Rome, you will sail with Artemisia as she commands her fleet in the Aegean Sea, and you will feel the weight of Joan of Arc's visions as she leads an army to save her people. These are not perfect stories—they are stories of real women, facing impossible choices and enduring unimaginable hardships. Their triumphs and tragedies are a testament to the strength of the human spirit.

A History of Defiance and Courage

Many of the women in this book lived in times when their voices were barely heard and their deeds quickly forgotten. History books were filled with stories of emperors, generals, and kings, while the heroics of women were often written out or ignored. Yet, there were moments when their courage was so great, their influence so undeniable, that their stories survived the test of time. These women fought in silence against the limitations imposed upon them, and in that struggle, they found a way to bring about lasting change.

Zenobia, the queen of Palmyra, was a woman of grand ambitions. She built an empire in the midst of the desert, challenged the Roman Empire, and led her people with vision and determination. Her story is one of daring and the will to create an independent future for her people. Boudica, the fierce queen of the Iceni, rose up against the Roman occupiers, driven by revenge and love for her people. Her rebellion became a symbol of resistance against oppression, even in the face of overwhelming power.

Joan of Arc, a simple peasant girl, was driven by her visions to save France from English domination. Her faith was her weapon, and her story did not end with her tragic death; it truly began when she grew into a symbol of courage and patriotism. Mulan, a young woman in China, took her father's place in the army, risking her life and hiding her true identity to protect her family. Her story, rooted in Chinese tradition, speaks to the universal human values of love, duty, and sacrifice.

Why These Stories Matter

It is essential to tell these stories, not only to correct history but also to remind ourselves that courage comes in many forms. The women in this book represent more than just historical figures; they have become symbols of strength, determination, and the will to stand against injustice. Their stories are still relevant today because they inspire us to not bow to limitations, to fight for what is right, and to choose our own paths regardless of the obstacles we face.

In today's world, where the fight for equality and justice continues, these stories offer a valuable source of inspiration. They remind us that the fight for freedom does not always have to be loud or public—sometimes it is the quiet, personal courage that makes the most difference. The strength of Zenobia, the conviction of Joan, the fury of Boudica, and the love of Mulan are all examples of how individuals, despite the expectations of their time, can change the course of history.

The Common Thread Between the Stories

The stories in this book are not isolated. Although they take place in different times and cultures, they are connected by a common thread of courage, defiance, and leadership. Each chapter shows how these women found their own form of strength, often against the expectations imposed by their society. Their stories show that leadership does not always come in the form of a throne or a crown—sometimes it comes in the form of a simple choice to stand up, to embrace the unknown, and to fight for what is right.

By telling the stories of Artemisia, Zenobia, Joan, and Mulan, it becomes clear that there is a universal human drive that unites them all. The desire for freedom, for justice, and for the ability to determine their own fate is what drives these women. These are stories of women who refused to be constrained by the norms of their time and who, through their actions, paved the way for those who came after them.

A Personal Note from the Author

While this book is based on historical events and people, some fictional elements have been used to make the stories a coherent and flowing narrative. These additions are meant to enrich the reading experience and to better convey the essence of these women and their courage.

This book is an attempt to bring the forgotten stories of these powerful women back to life. It is a tribute to their courage and their determination. When I began this project, I was struck by the similarities

between these women, despite their diverse backgrounds. Each of them stood at a crucial moment in history, faced with choices that would change their lives and those of their people forever. Their stories teach us not only about the past but also about our own possibilities in the present.

Writing this book was a journey through time—a journey that showed me how much has changed, but also how much remains the same. The challenges these women faced are, in many ways, still recognizable today. Many of us still feel the pressure of expectations, the need to care for our loved ones, and the desire to make a difference in the world. The stories of Zenobia, Boudica, Joan, and Mulan remind us that change always begins with one person who decides to act, to no longer stand by passively, but to rise and fight.

I invite you to read these stories, to feel the courage of these women, and to find your own courage in their words. This book is not just a history of women in battle; it is a history of the human spirit, of the will to be free, and the desire to seek justice. Let these stories inspire you, as they have inspired me, and let us together continue the legacy of these legendary women.

Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetae

Introduction and Context

The vast steppes of Central Asia stretched endlessly, their golden grasses waving beneath an azure sky that shifted between storm and serenity within a single breath. The landscape was dotted with wild tulips, sagebrush, and wormwood, plants that provided both beauty and practical use for the Massagetae. The tulips, blooming bright red in spring, symbolized the fleeting beauty of life, while wormwood, with its bitter scent, was used in rituals and medicinal concoctions. Eagles soared overhead, and steppe wolves prowled the edges of their camps, both feared and revered by the Massagetae as symbols of freedom and survival.

The Massagetae were deeply rooted in their traditions, with a culture that valued freedom above all else. They believed in the sacred bond between the earth and the spirit, honoring their ancestors through rituals that celebrated the cycles of nature. The people gathered during significant times of the year to hold feasts, offer sacrifices, and dance in honor of the spirits that guided them. One such ritual, held during the spring equinox, involved planting seeds of wild millet and burning juniper branches to ward off evil spirits and invite a bountiful harvest.

Their warriors, bound by oaths of loyalty to their tribes, saw combat as both a rite of passage and an obligation to defend their land and families. This was a land forged from resilience, a place where survival demanded strength. The Massagetae were a people of the steppe—nomadic, proud, and skilled in the art of war. They were bound to no kingdom but the one they carried on horseback, ruled by no walls

but the horizon itself. They thrived where others faltered, their lives shaped by the sun, the wind, and the constant movement of the herds they tended. The Bactrian camels and horses were central to their existence, not just as transportation but as companions and symbols of wealth. Herding sheep and goats across the endless plains, the Massagetae relied on the land for sustenance, using sheepskin to make warm clothing for the harsh winters and goat milk for nourishment.

The ever-changing landscape influenced every aspect of their lives, from the wind-swept grasses they used to thatch their yurts to the knowledge of how to find hidden sources of water beneath the parched earth. This knowledge of the land was passed down through generations, from parents to children, who learned to read the subtle signs of nature—the distant call of a bird indicating a waterhole or the bending of tall reeds showing where the ground was damp enough to dig for a drink. To the Massagetae, the steppes were not just home; they were a living entity that provided for them, challenged them, and ultimately defined their way of life.

Amidst the rolling grasslands, at the center of this fierce world, stood Tomyris. Born to rule, she had the spirit of her people flowing through her veins—strong, unyielding, relentless. As a child, she had listened to the stories of her ancestors, the battles they had fought, and the freedom they had won. Her father had taught her that their land was both cradle and crucible, a harsh place that birthed warriors. From her mother, she had inherited the fire that drove her, a fire that could not be extinguished even by the chill of loss.

Tomiris was not only a queen, but a mother. Her son, Spargapises, was her pride, her joy, and the heir to her kingdom. From an early age, Spargapises had shown promise. He led his first successful raid at the age of sixteen, outmaneuvering a rival tribe and returning with both spoils and the respect of his fellow warriors. It was moments like these, seeing his courage and natural leadership, that filled Tomiris with immense pride and hope for the future of their people. Together, they shared the burden of leadership. She had trained him herself, watched him grow from a boy into a warrior, his strength a reflection of her own. For Tomiris, ruling was more than power—it was protecting her people, her family, and the legacy of freedom passed down through generations. She imparted to Spargapises the wisdom of their people—the strategies of survival, the values of loyalty, and the courage to face adversity.

The Massagetae's connection to their land was both spiritual and practical. The vast steppes offered everything they needed—the wild horses that provided their mobility, the rivers that sustained them, and the open land where they roamed freely, following the seasons. Their homes were not fixed; they lived in yurts, portable homes made from felt and wood, easily dismantled and carried by their steeds. Within these homes, the families lived in close quarters, their bonds forged by the harsh realities of steppe life. Daily life was filled with tasks that reinforced their connection to the land: women would milk the mares each morning and churn the milk into kumis, a fermented drink that was central to their diet and culture, while the men would gather to train horses or hunt for game. The shamans held a special place in the community, acting as healers, spiritual guides, and intermediaries between the people and the unseen forces of nature. Before any major undertaking—be it a hunt, a

migration, or a battle—the shamans would lead elaborate rituals involving chants, dances, and sacrifices, all aimed at ensuring the blessings of their ancestors.

One such ritual, the Rite of the Steppes, involved the entire tribe gathering at dawn, their faces painted with sacred symbols as they offered the first fruits of the hunt to the spirits, followed by a ceremonial dance that mimicked the movements of their herds. The air would be thick with the scent of burning juniper, its smoke wafting upwards as offerings were made to the spirits. The rhythmic beat of drums filled the air, their deep resonance echoing across the plains. Children watched with wide eyes as the shamans, dressed in elaborate garments adorned with feathers and animal bones, began to chant, their voices rising and falling like the wind over the steppes. The people joined in, their feet stamping the ground in unison, dust rising around them as they moved in a circle, embodying the eternal cycle of life and death.

At the height of the ritual, a young lamb would be brought forth, a symbol of sacrifice to honor the spirits of the land. The shaman would raise his hands to the sky, invoking the blessings of their ancestors, before offering the lamb to the flames. As the fire crackled, the scent of roasted meat mingled with the juniper smoke, and the people would feast together, sharing stories of past hunts and victories, their laughter ringing out under the vast sky. The Rite of the Steppes was more than a ceremony; it was a reaffirmation of their bond with the land and each other, a reminder of who they were and what they fought to protect.

The steppes were vast and beautiful, but they could be unforgiving. The winters were harsh, with biting winds that swept across the open plains, and the summers brought sweltering heat that scorched the earth. The Massagetae lived in harmony with their environment, their way of life a reflection of the ebb and flow of the seasons. Children grew up learning how to ride before they could walk, their hands accustomed to the feel of a bow and arrow. The tribe moved together like one organism, their lives dictated by the needs of their animals, the cycles of nature, and the bonds they held with each other. Among them, Tomyris was not just a ruler but a symbol—of hope, of strength, and of unyielding loyalty to their traditions.

Tomyris herself embodied the resilience and fierce independence of her people. She would often ride alone across the vast expanse of the steppe at dawn, the chill of morning air invigorating her spirit. The rhythmic pounding of her horse's hooves on the hardened earth brought her a sense of peace and clarity. It was during these solitary rides that she felt most connected to the land and her ancestors, and where she sought guidance in times of uncertainty. The steppes were her sanctuary, a place where she could be free from the burdens of leadership, if only for a short while.

She would stop atop a rise, looking out across the boundless grasslands, watching the morning mist slowly lift under the sun's gentle touch. In these moments, she could almost feel her father's presence, hear his voice teaching her about the land and their duty to protect it. It was a sacred trust, passed down through the bloodline, a duty that Tomyris took upon herself with unrelenting resolve. The wind would whip her long dark hair, and she would close her eyes, breathing in

deeply, the scent of wild sage and grasses filling her senses. She felt at one with the world around her, each breath drawing her closer to the spirit of her ancestors.

Tomyris knew that her people depended on her strength, her wisdom, and her unbreakable spirit. She had always led from the front, whether in the council tent or on the battlefield. Her people respected her not just for her title, but for the way she embodied their ideals. She fought alongside them, shared in their hardships, and celebrated their triumphs. This was the bond that united the Massagetae—an understanding that they stood stronger together, bound by blood, by land, and by an unyielding desire for freedom.

The bond between Tomyris and Spargapises was central to her strength. She had raised him not only to be a warrior but also a leader. She taught him that compassion and strength must coexist in the heart of a ruler. Spargapises, with his youthful optimism and fierce determination, was her hope for the future. He brought joy to her life that was often filled with the heavy responsibilities of leadership. They would often spar together, both with weapons and words, challenging each other, sharpening their minds and their skills. These moments were precious to Tomyris, a reminder of the love and pride she held for her son.

She remembered the first time Spargapises had joined the warriors on a raid. She had watched from a distance, her heart clenched with a mixture of fear and pride. She saw the way he moved, his posture upright and confident, leading his men with a natural authority that filled her with hope. When he returned victorious, his face alight with the exhilaration of battle, Tomyris had embraced him, her heart swelling with

emotion. It was in that moment she realized that he was ready—ready to shoulder the burden that had been passed down through generations.

Despite her pride, Tomyris could never fully let go of her fears for Spargapises. She was acutely aware of the dangers he would face, the risks that came with leading their people. There were nights when the camp was quiet, and the only sound was the crackle of the fire, that Tomyris would sit alone, her thoughts consumed by the possible future—visions of loss, of her son in peril. She knew that she could not protect him from everything, that his path, like hers, would be fraught with challenges. Yet, she also knew that he was strong, that he had inherited the spirit of their people, and that whatever came, he would face it with courage.

The landscape of the steppe was both ally and adversary. It gave the Massagetae their strength, their resilience, but it also demanded respect. The winters could be brutally cold, the winds howling across the plains, biting into the flesh of anyone not properly sheltered. Tomyris remembered the winter when Spargapises was just a small boy. The cold had been relentless, and the tribe had faced hardship, their food supplies running dangerously low. She remembered sitting with Spargapises wrapped in furs, his small body shivering against hers, and whispering stories of their ancestors to keep his spirit strong. She spoke of the warriors who had faced the same cold, the same hardships, and who had prevailed because they never lost faith in their strength and in each other.

As the tribe moved with the seasons, Tomyris taught Spargapises the skills he needed to survive and to lead. They would ride out together, seeking the best grazing lands, reading the signs that nature provided. She

taught him how to spot the trails of game, how to find water in even the most arid parts of the steppe, and how to listen—to the wind, to the animals, to the unspoken needs of their people. These lessons were not just about survival; they were about understanding the intricate balance that held their world together.

The shamans, too, played a crucial role in Spargapises' upbringing. They taught him the sacred rituals, the songs, and the dances that connected the Massagetæ to their ancestors. Tomyris insisted that he learn these traditions, for they were the heart of their people's identity. She knew that without a deep understanding of who they were and where they came from, a leader could easily be swayed by the temptations of power. She wanted Spargapises to understand that his strength did not come from the sword alone, but from the spirit of his people, from their shared history and their shared dreams.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, Tomyris and Spargapises sat together by the fire. The flames flickered, casting dancing shadows across their faces. Spargapises looked at his mother, his eyes filled with questions. "Mother, do you think we will ever see a time when we no longer need to fight?" he asked, his voice tinged with both hope and uncertainty.

Tomyris looked at him, her eyes softening. "I do not know, my son," she replied honestly. "Perhaps one day, the world will be different. But until that day comes, we must fight—not because we love war, but because we love our people, our land, and our freedom. We fight so that those who come after us might live in peace."

Spargapises nodded, the flickering firelight reflecting in his eyes. “Then I will fight, as you have taught me. For our people, for our future.”

Tomyris reached out, placing her hand on his. “And I will fight beside you, always,” she said, her voice filled with emotion. “You are my heart, Spargapises. Never forget that our strength lies not just in our swords, but in our love for each other and for our people.”

The bond between mother and son was unbreakable, forged in fire and tempered by love. Together, they faced whatever the future held, drawing strength from their shared past and the unyielding spirit of the Massagetae. The steppes were vast, their challenges many, but as long as they stood together, Tomyris knew that they could overcome anything. The vast horizon was both a promise and a challenge, and Tomyris, with Spargapises by her side, was ready to meet it head-on, with all the courage and determination of her ancestors.

Tomyris and Spargapises

Tomyris' relationship with Spargapises went beyond that of a queen and her heir. She saw him as both her legacy and her hope for the future of the Massagetae.

"Mother," Spargapises began one evening as they sat by the fire, the embers glowing between them, "do you think we can ever truly be free from threats like Cyrus?" His voice held both curiosity and concern.

Tomyris looked at her son, her eyes softening as she met his gaze. "Freedom is never certain, my son," she replied, her voice steady. "It is something we must fight for, again and again. It is not given, it is earned. And even if we cannot see the end of these struggles, we must ensure that those who come after us inherit a land where they can fight their own battles, without fear."

Spargapises nodded, the flickering light highlighting the determination in his young face. "Then I will fight for our people, as you have taught me," he said. "I will not let them take our land or our spirit."

Tomyris reached across, placing her hand on his. "I know you will, my son. And I am proud of you for it. Remember, courage is not just about wielding a sword—it is about understanding what you are fighting for and never losing sight of it."

The bond between them, forged in such moments of shared conviction, was unbreakable. They spoke long into the night, not as queen and prince, but as mother and son, united by their love for their people and their desire for a future where the Massagetae could thrive in freedom. Spargapises had grown up with the stories of the great heroes of

the steppes—of warriors who fought not for glory but to protect their people. Tomyris had taught him to ride almost before he could walk, placing him on the back of a pony and guiding him across the endless plains. She remembered his laughter as the wind whipped his hair back, the pure joy of freedom that only those born on the steppe could truly understand. He had been her light, her hope in a world that was often harsh and unforgiving.

There were moments, quiet and unguarded, where they spoke not as queen and prince but as mother and son. She told him of her fears—the fear of losing their way of life, the fear that one day their freedom would be stripped away by a foreign power. Spargapises would listen, his young face set with determination, and promise her that he would always protect their people. In return, Tomyris shared the burdens of leadership with him, slowly and deliberately preparing him for the role he would one day assume. She watched as he grew from a boy into a young man, his shoulders broadening, his skill with a bow and sword becoming sharper. He embodied the spirit of the Massagetae, fierce and unbroken, and Tomyris was proud of him beyond words.

But underlying that pride was a constant current of fear. The fear that he would face dangers she could not protect him from, that he would make mistakes that would cost him his life. She had sent him into battle before, always with a sense of unease, but also with the knowledge that to shelter him too much would be to rob him of the ability to lead. When news came of his capture by Cyrus, it was as though her worst fears had come to pass. Yet, even in that moment of deepest despair, she found within herself a steely resolve. She would not allow her son to become a pawn in Cyrus' game.

Tomyris' nights were often restless, filled with visions of her son in chains, his eyes pleading with her to rescue him. She would wake with a start, her heart pounding, and immediately rise to consult her advisors. She knew she could not afford to falter. She reminded herself that her decisions were not only for her son but for all the Massagetae. It was the weight of leadership—a burden that demanded she put the good of her people above even her deepest fears as a mother.

To deal with the turmoil within her, Tomyris would often take long rides across the plains at dawn, feeling the wind whip against her face, the vastness of the steppe around her giving her the perspective she needed. She would speak to the spirits of her ancestors, asking for guidance, asking them to watch over Spargapises until she could bring him home. The rides calmed her, helped her focus, and she would return to her people more resolute, her heart hardened to what had to be done.

Cyrus' Perspective and The Persian Strategy

While Tomyris mourned the capture of her son, Cyrus the Great was filled with both confidence and curiosity. He had conquered countless lands, brought many rulers to their knees, and believed that the Massagetae would be no different. Yet, there was something about Tomyris that intrigued him—a fierceness that he rarely encountered in his conquests. Cyrus respected strength, and though Tomyris was his enemy, he couldn't help but admire her defiance.

He walked through the Persian camp, observing his soldiers as they prepared for the upcoming confrontation. The Massagetae had already proven to be more formidable than he initially expected. Their guerrilla tactics, their ability to disappear into the vast steppes, and their unbreakable spirit were obstacles that frustrated even his most seasoned generals. But Cyrus, ever the strategist, was determined to break them.

“General Pharnaces,” Cyrus called, his voice carrying across the camp. The general approached, bowing slightly before his king. “Tell me, how are the preparations for the next assault progressing?”

Pharnaces hesitated for a moment before answering. “My lord, the Massagetae are elusive. They strike swiftly and vanish before we can properly engage them. Our soldiers are unused to this type of warfare. They grow weary of chasing shadows.”

Cyrus nodded, his eyes narrowing as he considered the general's words. “They may fight like ghosts, but they are flesh and blood, just like us. We must draw them into a position where they cannot escape—force them to face us on our terms.” He paused, a smile playing at the corners

of his lips. “We will use what they value most against them. Spread word that we wish to negotiate. Offer them gold, lands—whatever they desire. And ensure that word reaches Tomyris. She will come for her son.”

Pharnaces bowed again and left to carry out his orders. Cyrus watched him go, his mind already working through the possibilities. He knew that Tomyris would not be swayed by gold or promises of power. She was a ruler who fought for her people, not for her own gain. But she was also a mother, and that was her weakness. Spargapises was his leverage, and Cyrus intended to use him to force Tomyris into submission.

In the makeshift cell where Spargapises was held, the young prince struggled against his restraints. The damp air clung to his skin, the smell of earth and sweat almost overwhelming. He could hear the distant clamor of the Persian camp—the clang of metal, the low murmur of voices, the occasional barked command. His body ached from the confinement, his muscles stiff and sore. But it was the uncertainty that weighed on him the most. He did not know if his mother was safe, if she even knew he was alive.

Spargapises closed his eyes, trying to center himself, to focus on the lessons his mother had taught him. He remembered her voice, calm and strong, as she instructed him on how to endure hardship. “Pain is temporary, my son. It is the spirit that must remain unbroken.” He repeated those words to himself, a mantra that helped him push back the fear. He knew his mother would come for him. She was Tomyris—unyielding, unstoppable. And until she arrived, he would endure.

Tomyris' Resolve and the Massagetae's Strategy

Back in the Massagetae camp, Tomyris gathered her war council. The leaders of the various tribes sat around the fire, their faces etched with worry but also determination. The fire crackled and cast dancing shadows across their faces, adding an almost ethereal atmosphere to the tense meeting. Tomyris stood before them, her posture commanding, her eyes burning with purpose. Despite the uncertainty, her presence exuded a calm strength that steadied the council's resolve.

“The Persians think they can break us,” she began, her voice carrying through the still night air, each word deliberate and measured. Her voice was the embodiment of the steppe wind: fierce, unyielding. “They think they can use my son as bait to lure us into a trap. But they underestimate the Massagetae. We will not be led like lambs to the slaughter. We will strike them where they least expect it.”

The leaders listened intently, their expressions shifting from concern to determination. They were men and women who had fought countless battles, who had weathered the brutality of the steppe. One of the tribal leaders, an older man named Artagh, spoke up, his brow furrowed in thought. “Queen Tomyris, how can we be sure of their intentions? Cyrus is cunning, and his men are well-trained. They will be prepared for any direct assault.” His voice, though marked by age, still carried the power and gravitas that came with years of leading warriors into battle.

Tomyris nodded thoughtfully. Artagh's caution was well-founded, and his wisdom was a valued asset to the Massagetae. "Which is why we will not attack directly," she replied, a glimmer of steel in her eyes. "We will use the land to our advantage. We know these steppes better than any outsider. We will lead them into the heart of our territory, where their numbers mean nothing. We will cut off their supplies, harass their flanks, and strike when they are at their weakest."

She paused, letting her words sink in. She knew the power of silence, the weight of a moment where the only sounds were the crackling of the fire and the distant rustling of the wind across the steppes. Her people needed to understand that this was not just a battle—it was survival, a test of their unity and their cunning.

She turned to Argan, one of her most trusted warriors, a man known for his courage and strategic brilliance. "Take a group of our best riders," she commanded, her voice carrying authority that brooked no hesitation. "I want you to create a diversion to the east. Make them think we are massing our forces there. Draw their attention away from our true objective."

Argan nodded, a fierce smile crossing his face. He relished the challenge, the chance to outwit the enemy. "It will be done, my queen," he said, his eyes flashing with determination. There was a murmur of approval from the gathered council. They knew Argan's skills, his ability to strike quickly and vanish like mist. He was the embodiment of the steppe itself—untamable, fierce, and relentless.

Tomyris looked at each of her council members in turn, her gaze intense, her eyes locking with theirs. She spoke, her voice low but filled with power. “This is not just about rescuing Spargapises. This is about showing Cyrus that the Massagetae are not his to conquer. We fight for our freedom, for our land, for our future. And we will not stop until every last Persian is driven from our home.”

The council erupted in agreement, the firelight reflecting in their eyes, turning them into fiery orbs of resolve. Voices rose in support, fists pounded on the ground, and the determination among them was palpable. Tomyris felt a surge of pride as she looked at her people—warriors, leaders, men and women who would fight to their last breath to protect what was theirs. This was what Cyrus could never understand—the love they bore for their land and for each other, a bond forged not by conquest, but by shared struggle and sacrifice.

Tomyris knew this war would not be easy. She knew the risks they faced, but she also knew that they had something Cyrus could never understand—an unbreakable bond to their land and to each other. She allowed herself a moment of vulnerability, her gaze softening as she thought of Spargapises. She knew the danger he was in, knew that each moment he spent in the hands of Cyrus was another moment of suffering. But she also knew that he was strong, that he had the heart of a true Massagetae warrior.

Turning her gaze back to the council, she spoke again, her voice softer now, almost a whisper that seemed to echo with the winds of the steppes. “We fight not out of hate, but out of love—for our people, for our children, for the freedom they deserve. The Persians believe they can break us by taking what we hold most dear. But they will learn that the bond between a mother and her child, between a people and their land, cannot be shattered by force.”

The silence that followed was powerful, a collective breath held by everyone present. The crackling of the fire seemed louder, the flames licking higher into the cold night air as if responding to her words. The warriors around her nodded solemnly. There was no fear, only resolve. They understood the stakes, and they were ready.

Artagh, the elder leader, stood up, his eyes meeting Tomyris’. “You have our loyalty, my queen,” he said, his voice deep and steady. “We will fight for Spargapises, for our future, and for the Massagetae. The Persians will know the strength of our people.”

The rest of the council rose, one by one, until they were all standing. They stood not just for Tomyris, not just for Spargapises, but for every child, every family, every ancestor who had walked the vast steppe before them. Together, they began to chant softly, a prayer to the spirits of the land, to their ancestors, asking for strength, for guidance, and for victory. The rhythmic chant, deep and resonant, filled the air, rising to meet the stars above. It was a song of defiance, of hope, and of unyielding resolve.

Tomyris watched them, her heart swelling with emotion. These were her people—unyielding, brave, and loyal. They would fight, not because they sought glory, but because they sought to protect what was theirs. She knew that together, they were unstoppable, a force that no empire could break.

She stepped back from the fire, allowing her warriors to make their preparations. Her gaze turned towards the horizon, where she knew Spargapises was being held. Her resolve hardened like steel. They would bring him back. And Cyrus would learn what it meant to face the wrath of a mother, a queen, and a people united.

Clash of Kings: Tomyris vs. Cyrus

Cyrus, confident that his plan would force Tomyris into a vulnerable position, moved his troops toward the location where he believed the Massagetae would engage him. The Persian army, vast and disciplined, marched with a confidence born of countless victories. They were accustomed to sweeping across enemy lands like an unstoppable force, their banners fluttering in the wind, their armor glinting in the sun.

But the steppes were unlike any battlefield they had faced before. The land itself seemed to conspire against them—vast stretches of emptiness that offered no shelter, no respite. The wild grasses, high and dense, obscured the terrain, making it difficult for the soldiers to maintain their formations. The dust-laden winds whipped at their faces, stinging their eyes, and even the horses seemed to struggle with the endless monotony of the landscape.

The vastness of the steppes was disorienting, and it seemed that every mile brought a new obstacle. The soldiers murmured amongst themselves, their faces streaked with dirt and sweat, each step becoming heavier as they advanced deeper into the unfamiliar terrain. They felt like intruders in a land that refused to welcome them—every gust of wind felt like a warning, every distant howl a reminder that they were not in control here. Even the sun seemed merciless, beating down on them without the shade of trees or the relief of streams.

As they advanced, the Persians found themselves harassed by small bands of Massagetae warriors who struck swiftly and then disappeared into the endless grasslands. These hit-and-run attacks were designed to frustrate the Persians, wearing them down slowly. The Massagetae were ghosts, striking in the dead of night, their arrows whistling from unseen positions, only to vanish before the Persians could muster a response. Supplies ran low, and the morale of the troops began to falter as they realized they were fighting an enemy who refused to meet them head-on. The Persian archers found themselves firing blindly into the mist, unsure if they were hitting anything, and the heavy infantry, burdened by their armor, struggled to keep up with the swift movements of the nomadic riders.

Cyrus rode at the head of his army, his eyes scanning the horizon. He knew that Tomyris was out there, watching, waiting for the right moment to strike. He could feel the tension building, the anticipation of battle hanging heavy in the air. He had underestimated the Massagetae once, and he would not make the same mistake again. He adjusted his tactics, ordering his generals to spread the forces out in a loose formation, hoping to draw out the Massagetae into a more direct confrontation. However, the Massagetae seemed to sense his every move, evading each attempt to bring them into a pitched battle.

Days turned into weeks, and Cyrus's frustration grew. His soldiers, unaccustomed to the unpredictable nature of the steppe warfare, began to show signs of fatigue. The men spoke in hushed tones about the ghost-like quality of the Massagetae—how they seemed to vanish into the very air, only to reappear and strike from an unexpected direction. The emotional toll on the Persian troops was palpable. They were used to

facing their enemies in open combat, where discipline and numbers provided an advantage. Here, on the vast steppes, their usual tactics seemed almost useless.

Cyrus began to understand the true challenge he faced. This was not a war of armies—it was a war of wills. The Massagetae, with their intimate knowledge of the terrain, had no intention of giving Cyrus the battle he wanted. Instead, they used the steppes to their advantage, choosing the time and place of every engagement. They lured small detachments away from the main force, ambushing them in narrow ravines or leading them into traps where the terrain worked against the Persians. The stress of the constant attacks began to weigh on the soldiers, and more than once, Cyrus found himself staring at his maps, searching for a way to gain the upper hand.

The emotional highs and lows of the soldiers became evident. When they managed to drive off a band of Massagetae, a cheer would rise through the ranks, and for a brief moment, the men would feel the surge of confidence they were accustomed to. But these moments were fleeting, quickly replaced by the tension of another long, grueling march across a landscape that seemed endless and indifferent to their suffering.

The daily grind of hunger, fatigue, and the fear of sudden attacks began to erode the discipline of the Persian troops. Soldiers whispered amongst themselves, their once bold spirits now subdued. There was talk of the Massagetae being protected by the spirits of the steppes, whispers that this land was cursed for any outsider daring to conquer it. Cyrus knew he needed to act quickly, but the endless expanse of barren land seemed to stretch on forever, each day blurring into the next, each night filled with unease.

Tomiris, on the other hand, watched the movements of Cyrus's forces with the calculating gaze of a hawk. She knew the Persians were struggling, that their spirits were being eroded by the relentless skirmishes and the unfamiliar land. Her warriors struck with precision, fading back into the mist before the Persians could properly retaliate. She made sure to keep her warriors mobile, never lingering in one place for too long, and always ensuring that they had the upper hand in every engagement.

The Massagetae had perfected the art of psychological warfare. They left behind false trails, led Cyrus's scouts into dead ends, and at night, they would light fires in the distance—just enough to keep the Persians awake and on edge. The howls of steppe wolves would echo through the darkness, adding to the sense of unease. It was as if the very land had turned against Cyrus, and the deeper he marched, the further he seemed from victory.

Cyrus's generals began to question the campaign. One evening, around a campfire, General Pharnaces spoke, his voice filled with the weariness of the past weeks. "My lord, we have been marching for weeks with little to show for it. The men are tired, and the Massagetae seem to anticipate our every move. Perhaps it is time to reconsider our approach."

Cyrus looked into the flames, his jaw clenched. He knew Pharnaces spoke the truth, but retreat was not an option. Not now, not after coming this far. "We cannot turn back," he said, his voice steely. "If we show weakness now, the Massagetae will only grow bolder. We must press on, find a way to draw them out."

He paused, then added, "We will force them into a decisive engagement. Prepare the men to fortify our position here. We will create a stronghold, and we will bait them into attacking us. They may fight like ghosts, but they bleed like any other. And we will make them bleed."

The next morning, the Persians began their preparations. They dug trenches, set up palisades, and formed a defensible camp, hoping to lure Tomyris into attacking them directly. The soldiers worked tirelessly, their bodies aching from the labor, but there was a renewed sense of purpose. Cyrus walked among them, offering words of encouragement, reminding them of their past victories and the strength of the Persian Empire.