



A
BRUTAL
JUSTICE

NEDÉ RISING SERIES



JESS CORBAN

Praise for *A Gentle Tyranny*

“Themes of justice, equality, . . . and abuse of power are developed in this well-written novel. . . . A series opener with an intriguing premise.”

KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Corban’s characters are charming and memorable, and the lush, verdant Central American jungle setting offers a fully fleshed-out paradise that is as tempting as it is freeing and readers will likely be captivated enough to read through this mysterious, imaginative plot in one long, thrilling sitting.”

BOOKLIST

“Jess Corban has created a firecracker of a new world. . . . *A Gentle Tyranny* is a fierce novel that forces readers to consider what the right thing really is.”

READER VIEWS

What Readers are Saying

“I decided to give this book a chance and I am so glad I did. . . . I was sucked in immediately.”

LIBRARIAN, NetGalley

“It’s the kind of feminist fic that flips the script. . . . Corban’s narrative style is wonderful.”

ALEX, Goodreads review

“*A Gentle Tyranny* passes the Bechdel test with flying colors . . . [and] appeals to the adventurer in all of us. . . . I recommend *A Gentle Tyranny* to female readers of any age.”

EMWEIM, Barnes & Noble review

“Fascinating plot line; . . . thought-provoking social and cultural constructs; engaging characters and relationships. Highly recommend!”

EMILY, Books-a-Million review

“If you found yourself gripped by the pages of *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*, don’t miss this book.”

CLAIRE Z.

“A masterpiece of fiction. . . . Jess Corban has breathed new life into a well-worn genre. . . . I’ll make the prediction that this will be one of my favorite novels of the year.”

JOSH, Goodreads review

“This is a fantastic book, authored by a fantastic author. The ability to craft a world that is the end-all for some and a nightmare for others and explain why the grass isn’t always greener on the other side via narrative is an art form not many have mastered.”

NICKIE, Goodreads review

“I read the first book in 3 days—I simply couldn’t put it down. Intriguing, action-packed, and adventurous on every page, *A Gentle Tyranny* is well worth the read!”

GENEVIEVE Z.

“This book is a compelling example of how a perfect civilization is impossible, that corruption is not specific to any one gender, and how, ultimately, the person we are is who we choose to be. It’s a unique coming-of-age story and I’m very much looking forward to how the series will continue!”

JESSICA, Barnes & Noble review

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*To the Brute who completes a part of me no one
else can. Life is richer because of your love.*



DIVISADERO

RIO DEL SUR

CAMINO DEL OESTE

AMAL

LAPE

PHOENIX CITY

CENTER

FINCA DEL MAR

HALCYON SEA

W

N

E

S

MOUNTAINS

LA FORTUNA

KEKUATAN

BELLA TERRA

JABIRU RIVER

FIK'IRI

HIGHWAY VOLCAN

ARENA



Part One

CHAPTER ONE



NEDÉ, MARCH 2267

MY FINGERS REFUSE TO FORGET what they've done. A frantic pulse thrums in my ears as my fore- and middle fingers tremble against the corner of my mouth. The bowstring shivers with an echo of my unsteady grip on the riser. I blink hard, trying to focus, begging my mind to erase the memory of his face. But his eyes remain vivid with unexpected tenacity, boring into mine, pleading with me: *Do it. Do it, Reina!*

The Matriarch stands behind Tre's kneeling form, encircled by the Arena's towering bleachers, her sheer, multicolored robe lifting with a slight breeze. Her face twists in a jeering snarl. "What are you waiting for, Candidate?" Her mouth forms the words, condescension dripping from her lips like the blood I am about to

shed, but the voice drifting across the Arena now is too grounding to be hers.

I know that voice. It's brave and beautiful and tinged with gold. *Trinidad.*

The scene mercifully melts into reality, a wooden target replacing Treowe's face, my mentor and newly appointed instructor analyzing my form, not Teera. Dozens of Alexia train around me. As I fight to find my bearings, Trin grows impatient, and she's not a woman one wants to irritate. "Let's go, Reina!"

Come on! I shout at myself, pushing down the haunting memories. Hesitation will bring questions I can't afford to answer. Still, I haven't shot a bow since—*Don't think about that now. Focus.* I've only been Alexia for ten minutes. Adoni might rescind her offer if I can't pull it together. I force my mind to clear, channeling every regret, every fear, every question I've battled since killing my best friend here three days ago, into a single shot.

If all the energy on the crowded Arena floor—the force of every thrust, kick, jump, jab—coalesced at this exact moment, it still wouldn't match the force of my arrow when I finally let it fly.

Crack! The tip burrows so deep it passes through the jute target, burying itself in the wood backing.

In a rush of anger, I unsheathe my sword and fling it for good measure. It spirals like a maniacal windmill before meeting its mark, centimeters from my arrow.

"Eager much?" Trin frowns. "Do me a favor and stick to the drills. You haven't been Alexia long enough to make your own rules."

When she turns, I quickly swipe what might be a tear with the back of my dusty palm. "Sorry. I'm just . . . excited." I infuse the word with a little too much pep, garnering a raised eyebrow from my instructor.

It's not that Trin doesn't know I murdered a Gentle in this

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Arena. She was there, standing by with an expressionless face when I had hoped she'd offer some hint at a way out. She just doesn't know that Gentle was my best friend. That he was the only one who really knew me—understood me. The one who'd leave bloodred hibiscus flowers where he was sure I'd find them, the friend who would tease me by the bank of the Jabiru River, under the shade of our favorite fig tree, while we shared savory pastries stolen from the Bella Terra kitchen or ripe fruit from Mother's fields. She doesn't know the loss of him is threatening to undo me.

And I don't plan to tell her.

After the first shot, thankfully others come easier. Minutes turn into hours under a sweltering Nedéan sun. We train with bow and blade before practicing hand-to-hand combat techniques. A few familiar faces catch my eye throughout the morning, including Fallon and Valya, who were in my patrol group during Succession training. Fallon nods a greeting; younger Valya waves. Many of the drills are familiar too, transporting me to that time when my only concern was making Grandmother proud so I could become her Apprentice. The time before my familiar, safe world was upended. Before an unexpected plunge into the Jungle wilds proved so much of what I knew to be a lie.

By midday, the humid heat threatens to melt me faster than butter in a fry pan. I don't even try to hide my relief when our ranks file out for the noon meal. Returning my bow, I fall behind Trin and we weave through dozens of Alexia, racking their weapons and talking of strangely ordinary matters—hopes for lunch and troubles with neighbors—before slipping through the stone archway of the north gate toward the barracks and culina, where the Alexia take their meals.

Just outside the Arena walls, Adoni stands with her back to us, one foot resting on a raised planter. Even from behind, the leader of the Alexia is unmistakable, a rope of braid descending from the

unshaved half of her head over a shoulder covered with a massive dragon tattoo. “Report back to the Arena in an hour,” she says to someone obscured by her broad back.

I chance a look as we pass by, curiosity getting the better of me. A curtain of blonde bangs frames the visitor’s angular cheekbones and thin nose. When she sees me, a familiar smirk spreads across her pale face. I nearly slip on the gravel underfoot as I halt midstride.

Brishalynn?

Adoni strides back toward the Arena, but I just stand there gaping at my former fellow Candidate, eyes probably bugging out of my face.

“What’s wrong, Rei? You look like a hooked fish.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What else would I be doing here? I’m joining the Alexia.”

“But . . . you were a Politikós. In Amal.”

“Why the change?” Trin cuts in.

I’d wager the Alexia second-in-command saw enough of Bri during Candidate training to be a little wary.

Bri flashes her signature bravado at us—90 percent show, 10 percent scared little girl. “Let’s just say the Matriarchy isn’t filling me with warm fuzzies of loyalty lately. With Apprentice Evil in line for power, I like the prospect of having a weapon in hand.”

She turns the short sword in her palm casually, sun glinting off the polished metal. *Lovely*. The last time Bri had a weapon around me, it ended up centimeters from my chest while I slept. My turn to lose the warm feelings.

Trin raises an eyebrow in suspicion. “And Adoni let you in?”

Bri nods. “And since I know you’re hoping, I’ll spoil the surprise: I’m training with you.” She accentuates her wide grin with a wink.

Since the first day of training, Bri’s attitude has been a pain in

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my rear. As Amal Province's rightful Candidate, she let everyone know she wasn't happy about Teera selecting me to compete. Saving her life during hand-to-hand combat with Jamara did change our relationship some, I suppose. I wouldn't say we became *friends*—she did come very close to killing me—but we're not exactly enemies either.

Despite my lingering reservations, I can't help but snort at her audacity. "Lucky us."

By the time we break for the day, the western sun hangs as heavy as my own spent limbs. My forefingers throb in time to my footsteps, not yet used to shooting so many arrows. Not as bad as the first day of Candidate training, but as I rack my bow, I know I'll feel it in the morning. Taking a cue from the other Alexia, who look like they actually know what they're doing, I leave my short sword sheathed on my thick belt.

Fatigue notwithstanding, I held my own out there. Trin was proud, though she tried not to show it.

Bri racks her bow next to mine. Always full of surprises, she didn't do half-bad either. She worked hard and curbed her cheek, *mostly*. Just like our last time in the Arena, she picked up the techniques quickly. Before the Succession, Bri spent three years as a Politikós, enrolled at one of the prestigious Amal schools specializing in the destiny. Most attend to have a better chance at being elected as a Senator instead of being relegated to clerks, recorders, or tax collectors. They also learn about each of Nedé's nine core destinies—including Alexia—in case the ruling Matriarch initiates a Succession. Bri was professionally educated to have an edge over the competition. Unfortunately for her, Matriarch Teera added me to the mix. Who knows whether I actually ruined her chances, but

I'm still surprised she'd walk away from all that Politikós training and experience to start over. Destiny changes are rare in Nedé and usually require extenuating circumstances—like limb loss for an Agricolátio, or a Materno who has complications birthing children or something. I don't know what to think of Bri's defection.

"See you at the barracks," I say, peeling away to find my horse.

Bri wrinkles her nose. "You need a shower."

I shake my head.

Alexia stream from the Arena, black vests and riding pants powdered with fine dust. Those who trained with horses today hand them to waiting Gentles, then they're off to find showers and clean clothes before late afternoon turns to evening. Me? Doubting the stablehands will touch my "mutt," I decide to tend to Callisto myself. This morning Adoni reiterated that her offer to have Trinidad train me didn't extend to my horse. The Alexia ride only sleek Lexanders in shades of coal and dark umber. Their equines are as much a part of their uniform as their signature black vests and unconventional hairstyles. So tomorrow I'll have to figure out a way to get Callisto back home to Bella Terra, my mother's finca.

I flip the leather reins over her head to use as a lead rope. Not that she needs it. She has a habit of tailing me like a one-tonne puppy. I'm still not used to the saddle and tack of the Alexia. I prefer to ride bareback, a simple neck rope all I need for my spirited pinto. She watches me with glossy brown eyes, and I brush loose hairs from the white patch on her neck as we walk.

"You're a good girl, Callisto. It's not your fault you're prettier than the rest of them. They're just jealous of you—that's why they won't let me keep you." What started as jest catches in my throat. Even joking about not having her with me cuts too deep. I can't imagine doing this without her.

The Arena stables and adjacent fields house hundreds of horses, not to mention the rural fincas in other provinces that

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keep hundreds more at the ready. Here, dozens of paddocks flank a massive open-beam stable, where a parade of horses wait to be brushed and bedded for the night. Everywhere horses of chocolate, coal, and toasted allspice whinny, twitch, and graze. I inhale sharply, reveling in the smell of cut grass and sweaty steeds, letting the truth of where I am smack me sideways. I'm one of them now. I did it. I belong here.

After aspiring to—and failing to secure—the Apprenticeship, it seems silly now to think how long I spent worrying over the dilemma of my destiny. How many years did I practice at my secret teak forest arena, worried Mother would hate me for becoming Alexia? And for what? After all her warnings about Teera's need for control, she's probably *relieved* I've ended up here in the end.

I lead Callisto to the barn, bypassing a long line of horses awaiting the Gentles' attention. Inside, dozens of stablehands untack fine steeds as quickly as their gentled bodies allow, brushing sweat from their coats and leading them into stalls. Midas, Trinidad's horse, sniffs at a fresh bag of feed in her box while shooing a fly with her gold-tipped tail.

A crosstie opens up, and I seize the opportunity to steer Callisto into it, then quickly slide the leather saddle from her sweaty back. Adoni's jet-black Nyx stamps restlessly nearby, eyeing everyone around her with an air of superiority. Her handler—a stout Gentle with sandstone hair and a pockmarked face—balances precariously atop a short ladder, trying to slide the heavy saddle from Nyx's back. Someone drops a bucket; the metal clang startles the brawny horse. With a flick of her head she rears, knocking the Gentle off balance. He teeters a moment, then flails backward and falls a meter and a half to the ground. At the last second he thrusts an arm back to break his fall. The limb hits the dirt with a sickening crack.

A miserable scream reverberates through the breezeway. Two

other Gentles rush to his aid, trying to coax him to a sitting position. His right arm protrudes from his side at an unnatural angle, wrist bending awkwardly inward, a sharp point of bone protruding just below his elbow.

My stomach lurches. *Brittle bones.* Unlike a woman's, it doesn't take much to shatter a Gentle's skeleton. Just another unfortunate, natural weakness of Nedé's servants. Or so we've been taught.

Now, knowing the truth, I can't watch the stablehand shudder in agony without guilt pricking me deep. We've made them this way. To keep ourselves safe. Is their gentleness worth robbing them of health, of passion, of life?

For the hundredth time this week, Rohan's question bubbles in the thick stew of my uncertainty: *Which is better?*

When I encountered my sister Ciela at the Center weeks ago, she suspected Brutes were to blame for the raid on Jonalyn's finca. She was right—about the raid and about their danger. They're dangerous because we can't control them. But who gives us the right to decide their fate?

Protect the weak. Safety for all. Power without virtue is tyranny.

When the foremothers founded Nedé, women were the weak who needed protection. Women needed safety. They vowed to wield power better than the Brutes—with kindness and virtue. Have we?

The injured stablehand goes limp, passing out from the pain, and it takes four other Gentles to drag him to a cart. They argue over who will transport him to the Center, the only medical facility in Phoenix City. But a Gentle's heart handles trauma little better than his bones; I wonder if this one's will keep beating until they arrive.

What have we done? These are the weak among us, and rather than protect them, we treat them as servants at best, annoyances and liabilities more often. Worse, now I know *we're* the cause of their weakness.

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The force of this Gentle's pain, the weight of our treachery, snaps something inside me, too, and I push my way into the commotion.

"Give him to me," I command, not waiting for a response as I snatch the harness from the nearest Gentle. It fits snugly around Callisto's midsection. I adjust the straps, then slide the cart's poles through the rigging.

I'll take him to the Center, and then I'll find Ciela—she must know something that will help me help them. If the vaccine makes Gentles like this, I have to find a way to stop it. Maybe there's even some way to reverse the damage we've done. Rash? Maybe. But I have to do *something*.

