

# Pretium Silenti

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The Price of Silence

By Spyrel

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**Sex:** This story includes non-consensual intercourse of the physical kind (that means 'rape' if you weren't following along). It's not glamorous. It's not fun. Nor is it what this story is about. Speaking of which, those of you looking for a little nookie between our favorite pair best keep looking. That's not what this story is about either. However, there are plenty of references to and discussions about same-sex relations, and even a bit of physicality. If this offends you or is illegal where you live, I leave it up to you to hit the 'Back' button on your browser.

**Violence:** Excessive amounts of violence. I mean people getting hurt left, right, and sideways. Not just hurt. Maimed. Killed. With blood and stuff. Often for no good reason. Again, if it ain't your bag, don't hyperventilate into it.

**Special Thanks:** To my partner, who tolerated this obsession of mine for eighteen months and fell asleep many-a-night to the glow of the laptop in our bed. And Cinnabari, who convinced me that it is possible for a fully-employed person to write a novel on the side, and beta-read this story and offered great comments which I did my best to address, and checked my Latin, and continues to inspire me with her own fiction. I also want to thank all the bards out there who write this stuff, especially Carola "Ryûchan" Eriksson and her story "Gladiator" for planting the seed for this story in my mind.

**Summary:** While in Rome to renegotiate a treaty, the Conqueror meets an unusual gladiator.

**Feedback:** Almost forgot. This is my first fic; if you like it, or even if you read it, please send your comments to [spyrel@yahoo.com](mailto:spyrel@yahoo.com).

**FYI:** To read this story in book formatting, visit [Spyrel's Descent](#).

# I Parda Romae

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The Leopard of Rome

## 1 Ludi

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Games

Flowers, coins, and the cries of an unruly crowd pelted the sands of the Forum, voices coalescing into one steady roll of thunder that shook the wooden stands. Fists clenched, the fighter they clamored for raised his massive arms and loosed a howl. It drowned under the roar of the masses.

In the consul's viewing box, the guest of honor reclined and yawned, watching Caesar in the corner of her eye. Her host's head turned slightly, his crown of golden laurel leaves glittering like fiery stars. Faint pleasure tugged at the woman's lips; she felt no desire to hide her derision for her host or his entertainment.

"Are the games not to your liking?"

Her smile broadened. "Watching them fight is tiresome. Is this the best your famous gladiators have to offer?"

Condescension dripped from his smile. "Not bloodthirsty enough for you?"

Her wrist flicked dismissively toward the sands where slaves hurried to clear away the mess for the next bout. "Your so-called Samnites and Thracians are just Romans with different weapons. Same stances, same moves, same strategies, over and over and over again. No fire. No imagination. Boring."

She aimed for a rise from him; he let it pass with a false smile. “Perhaps it is the watching. Would you enjoy it more if it were you down there? Against him, perhaps?”

The victorious gladiator strode out of the arena, his massive muscles glistening with oil and exertion. She hardly spared him a glance. “Don’t insult me. The only sweat I’d break against that one would be from the heat.”

“I am just trying to make your stay more pleasant, Conqueror.”

“Then get to your point, Caesar.”

A slow drink from the golden goblet, a click of the tongue. “Merely that Rome offers many avenues to work off...excess energy.”

His refusal to speak plainly made her scowl, only served to reinforce her loathing for the asp who proclaimed himself dictator of Rome. Sitting this close to him, smelling his perfumed clothes...it made her skin crawl, and not in fear. Only a healthy amount of practicality stayed her hands from knotting around his throat. The Praetorian Guard lurked just out of sight down the passage behind them, and within the bounds of Rome stood several more legions that would make escaping the city a less-than-pleasant task. So she shook her head, willed herself into the stillness she found in a perfect breath, and waited. She would make her move soon enough. Or he would, and tip his hand.

The next match had already begun. A group combat this time, commemorating some ancient battle the Conqueror knew and cared little about. The larger unit wielded spears and shields, advancing in ragged formation upon six warriors garbed in the plumed helmets, shaped breastplates, and round shields of ancient Hoplite soldiers. Outnumbered three to one, the Greeks retreated before the wall of spearmen, standing shoulder to shoulder and trying to avoid being flanked, cornered, or surrounded.

The Conqueror sighed. If she had to tolerate this mockery of combat, she’d at least study what passed for Roman tactics.

The spearman took experimental jabs at the soldiers, bolstered by their larger numbers and the impatient jeers of the crowd. One in particular found the courage to lunge and jab at the smallest soldier in the bunch.

Quick as blown sand, his target hopped out of reach, grabbing the shaft of the spear and giving it a sharp jerk. The Conqueror almost laughed aloud; the lunging man found himself sprawled to the sand between two hungry-looking opponents. In moments they hacked him apart, reforming into a defensive wall before the spearmen hardly knew what happened.

All Tartarus broke loose.

The spearmen rushed in a great if not unified wave, penetrating and collapsing the wall. For a few chaotic seconds it looked as though the soldiers were all but finished. Moments later the line reformed, soldiers stepping back over the wounded bodies of the flanked vanguard.

The Hoplites faced far fewer enemies but not without cost. One soldier near the edge found two spears in his side, falling even as his wild swing bit deep into the calf of one of his killers. Now the battle raged in earnest, with spearman rushing to surround the defenders and pin them into a tight group, the better to skewer them at leisure. One soldier grabbed a spear of his own, threw it into a lightly armored chest, grabbed that man's spear and ran through two more before his crowd-pleasing rashness cost him his life.

Even so, his actions broke the tightening noose. The soldiers pressed outward, fighting two on one. The smallest fought with blinding speed and ferocity. The cumbersome Greek shield discarded, two gladii flashed forward and back, deftly deflecting the jab of one spear and swiping at another spear's wielder; his weapon dropped to the sand, the hand that held it laid open to the bone. As one glittering blade deflected the other spearman's thrust, a toe hooked under the long shaft in the sand and kicked it into its owner's face, cracking him across the nose. His head snapped back and the tip of the second gladius flicked out. Red spray hissed from his neck, drawing a swell of cheers from the crowd.

The Hoplite showed no sign of noticing, now fully engaged with the other spearman. A jump back to avoid one thrust, then another, then another. The Conqueror smirked; clearly the spearman hadn't paid attention earlier. As if on cue, the emboldened man jabbed one time too many. A gladius carried the sharp tip aside, its wielder spinning full circle, closing the distance, the second blade chopping deep into the side of the man's neck. Red showered across the hot sand; the audience roared in appreciation.

He earned only a moment to breathe before another soldier dropped lifeless to the dirt and his attacker charged. The gladius deflected what would have been a killing thrust, but the larger man's momentum sent them tumbling in the thick sand, weapons flying one direction, helmets another. The Hoplite popped up, short sweat-soaked hair gleaming almost white under the hot sun. A woman.

The stands exploded, hisses and catcalls mingling with a growing chant upon recognizing her. From Caesar's box, his guest couldn't make out what they screamed, but their energy shot through her like electricity. Unconsciously she sat up straighter, leaning forward for a better view of the scuffle below.

Weaponless, both gladiators scrambled to their feet, looking for anything to bring to bear. The man found a great shield and came in swinging, catching the smaller gladiator before she could hop away. Though the hit sent her flying she somehow landed on her feet, eyes still darting around for a weapon. He was almost half again her size, swinging the unwieldy shield like a club. Whip fast she dropped under one swing, spun low and kicked a leg out from under him. Already off balance, he twisted and dropped hard on his tailbone. One short powerful leg cracked across his temple, knocking him to the sand in a stunned heap.

A great roar from the crowd jarred the Conqueror back to her seat at the edge of the arena. The screams of the mob finally coalesced into one great rousing voice, grinding against the Conqueror's heightened senses. "*Parda, Parda, Parda!*"

Leopard. Breathing heavily, the fair gladiator retrieved a sword and faced the spearman. He roused, dazed eyes wide with fear and pleading as he raised a finger of submission.

Just as her pulse slowed it jumped again, pounding in her ears as the Leopard's eyes rose to gaze at her, waiting.

No, not at her. At Caesar, whose dark unreadable eyes burned into the Conqueror. She leaned back like some great languid cat, indifferent to the gory display, to his decision. Still, every fiber of her being felt him stand, take in the crowd, the mood, the overwhelming shouts for mercy.

At his sign, the gladius plunged into the thick neck, pulled free with a great gush. Boos and insults outweighed the cheers; food and coins bounced off the leather breastplate, the blood-spattered face. If she heard or felt any of it she showed no sign. Pale eyes lingered on the box for only a moment before she dropped the blade and turned away.

One eyebrow peaked at his decision, at the palpable fury of the crowd. "They don't seem to like the Leopard much."

Caesar reclaimed his seat. "She's not a very good gladiator."

The Conqueror snorted. "She's better than that sorry excuse for a spearman."

He smiled. "Oh, she's an excellent fighter. She just lacks a certain...flair. She doesn't play for show. She plays to win. Not much fun to watch." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Unless you disagree?"

She didn't answer, watched the gladiator disappear under the shadowy arch of victory.

## **2 Regina Bestiae**

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### **Queen of the Beasts**

The Leopard ran.

Legs pumped with a strength born of desperation, fighting the poor purchase of the sand to outrun the pounding behind her. Every five steps she took the beast covered in a single bound. There was nothing to hide behind here, no overturned chariot or horse carcass to put between her and the hungry predator. She fast ran out of territory, closing with the arena wall and an end to escape.

A feral snarl behind her fed strength to burning legs. Planting one solid foot she leapt, pushed off the wall and spun in mid-air, slashing with the gladius.

The blade bit deep into an outstretched paw the size of her head even as it hooked into the bare flesh of her side. She twisted away as she fell, curled shoulders at the last second and tumbled in a spray of sand, instinctively rolling to her feet. A shape blocked the sun. She threw herself aside, slashing up and laying the cat's ribs open as it landed where she'd stood.

It spun in place, all claws and teeth bared. The good paw ripped at the small shield strapped to her forearm. Claws as long and sharp as daggers bit deep into the wood, almost yanking her arm out of socket. She thrust her gladius between her and the creature to keep it at bay. The predator hung back, hurting and wary, gave her time to flex her shoulder and regroup, spare a quick glance down. That giant paw had left its mark; liquid life trickled down her bare breast and side to stain the loincloth, red mixing in long rivulets with gold paint and black Leopard spots. Even shallow scratches would cost her dearly in a long match.

She was tired of running.

The powerful paw smacked against the shield again. Braced for the blow, she countered with a sharp stab into the muscular foreleg between the thick bones. The monster recoiled with a deafening roar, yanking the blade from her. The other paw lashed out, knocking her back to the sand.

She scrambled to her feet with less grace the second time. Her shield arm could barely brace against her ribs without sharp knives stabbing through her left shoulder. Blood poured from deep gashes in her sword arm, dripped from her smallest finger to dye the pale sand.

Weaponless she backed away, her eyes never leaving the beast as slick fingers fumbled with the knots fixing the shield to her forearm. The golden cat advanced, limping badly now on the impaled foreleg. Hunger and pain finally drove it forward, swiping again at the fair head just out of reach. Timing would decide the match now. The cat's broken rhythm almost caught her twice, forcing her to jump back as claws raked across the gouged buckler. Then she dove in, smashing the paw aside with a great arc of the shield and swinging onto the monster's back, one fist knotted in the thick mane while the other brought the wooden disc smashing down upon its massive head. The creature staggered. Three more blows, and it collapsed.

The shield raised to strike again, but the great cat lay still. Sucking in labored breaths the gladiator pushed herself up, worked the gladius from its tight sheath of flesh. A splash of opulent purple drew her eyes to the consul's box. For the second time in as many days, she waited for the signal.

And as before, he had a guest. Though dressed as a Roman noblewoman, pale eyes gazed down at the victor with guarded appreciation, some intimacy with violence no noblewoman shared. She found herself staring up, wondering what the woman knew, what her arrow-like gaze saw in the arena.

An unsettling feeling came over her, and for the first time, she noticed the crowd. Not shouting; such noises were as silence in the arena. No, from the crowd she heard—felt—murmuring. Dimly the clinking of armor pushed into her consciousness. Two dozen Praetorians formed up around her, swords drawn.

The signal. The Emperor stood there, his expression sour, again giving the signal. How long had she stood there, staring at his guest, armed and unmoving? The punishment for disobeying Caesar was death. She blinked, dazed, turned to her opponent. It twitched, slowly stirring. Hardly aware, she thrust her blade through the creature's corded neck, dispatching it.

A sharp blow knocked the gladius from blood-slicked fingers. Calloused hands grabbed her arms and escorted her out of the arena. She did not struggle, wondered at her own distraction.

Just inside the gate, guards slapped manacles on her wrists before leading her down. The dimness below reigned as absolute as the brightness above, swallowing her up as surely as that hungry beast meant to. Jostled by the rough grip of the soldiers, stabs of pain sent commands coursing through her body to protect itself. With great effort she willed her arms to relax. Any tension would be read by her escorts as resistance. Any resistance would bring swift reprisal.

They stopped, keys unlocking a cell door. She stepped in quickly, before the guards felt a need to throw her in. Only when the door locked behind her did she exhale, slide down the wall to sit next to the door.

For many minutes she rested, head back against the stone wall, spots leaping before her closed eyes. Finally they opened, gradually taking in the weak torchlight that washed the walls with swimming red.

Something warm and wet met her thigh, a stream of dark trickling from the triumvirate of gashes across her forearm. She reached through the bars, retrieved a cloth and dipped it in the bucket of water left for her there. Scrubbing angered the ragged edges of flesh, but it seemed to clear the sand from the wounds, and finally she wrapped a fresh cloth snug around the arm and did her best to tie it off with her teeth. Her shoulder throbbed, her side itched, other places ached and warned of future stiffness, but none of them seemed dangerous. The cell offered isolation, safety. Parda slunk away from the bars and pressed deep into a corner, knees guarding her bare chest, allowing herself the luxury of drifting off for a short time.

### **3 Oblectamentum Vesperae**

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#### **An Evening's Distraction**

“Great Caesar, welcome to my home!”

The old senator gestured with a wide sweep for the Emperor and his entourage to enter. Their host's eyes widened with pleasure. "Xena, the Conqueror of Greece! I am most humbled by your presence."

Her pale blue eyes barely flickered his direction in response. Caesar sighed, smiled politely, if not genuinely. "Gracchus, thank you for seeing us. I am sorry for the late hour, but our esteemed guest needed a break from the day's negotiations."

"Oh, think nothing of it. Hard work, negotiations. Nothing like a day in the senate to leave me ready for a trip to the baths. Have you had the pleasure of visiting our baths, my lady?"

The Destroyer of Nations lounged upon a long couch. She'd traded the revealing dress of the day for a well-worn set of fighting leathers, though she looked just as stunning, if a bit more dangerous. "You will address me as Conqueror."

The old man faltered only a moment. "Of course, how inappropriate of me. Let me offer you refreshments this evening. Or would you like a larger spread?"

"We didn't come to socialize."

Caesar almost grinned at the woman's asperity. He offered the senator a disarming smile. "Congratulations on your success in the arena today."

"Our success? Oh, quite right, quite right. A nasty bit of work, that lion. We're very pleased—"

"I want to spar her." The Conqueror leaned back on her palms, candidly calm.

The man's countenance faltered again. "Spar her?" He glanced at the consul for confirmation.

Caesar nodded. "As you may have heard, Senator, the Conqueror is an aficionado of armed combat. She would like to stretch her muscles against your star gladiator's sword."

His jaw went slack with comprehension. "Oh. Conqueror. I think that unwise. These gladiators, they can be...unpredictable, as you saw today in the arena. Should you suffer even the slightest scratch, I would feel responsible—"

"She would be holding the sword, not you. And I wouldn't worry about her landing a blow on me. Or are you not familiar with some of my many skills?"

The old senator snapped his jaw shut, reconsidered. "I have several fine gladiators, any one of which could provide you great sport—"

"But she is your purse winner." The Conqueror flashed teeth, guessing the source of his hesitation. "Would it ease your mind if I promised not to hurt her...too much?"



Gracchus looked pinched, turned to Caesar for reinforcement. Little was forthcoming. “Senator, perhaps the Conqueror could compensate you for any forfeited matches if she’s injured?”

He swallowed, dark eyes darting between the two smirking faces before him. With the crook of a finger a slave stepped forward; whispered instructions sent him hurrying away. The pale man licked sweat-dewed lips, turned once more to the consul. “Caesar, I most humbly apologize for her transgression in the arena today. I hope this is not about that. You know of her...limitations. I promise you, it won’t happen again.” The consul pursed his lips distastefully, examining a nail, ignoring his feeble excuses. The Conqueror stared through him, his presence insignificant. He shrank, defeated. “The practice yard is this way.”

A shiver of anticipation fluttered through the Conqueror. She followed him into the torch-lit dirt courtyard, took in the training posts, weapons racks, and dummy targets with practiced ease. As long minutes passed, a drawing on the wall caught her eye. Though crudely rendered, the figure of a spotted woman-beast pinned a helmed gladiator to the ground, sharp teeth bared to the thraex’s gushing throat. Above it the artist had scrawled an inscription: *Parda involat*.

“‘The Leopard pounces.’ Why do they call her that?”

Caesar chuckled. When he didn’t answer, Gracchus cleared his throat, offered a weak smile. “There are many stories, Conqueror. Some say this depicts a true story, that she won her first fight by tearing her opponent’s throat out with her teeth. Others say her first opponent was a leopard she killed with her bare hands.”

The Conqueror grinned at the idea. “What do you think, senator?”

Gracchus’ lips pursed as he studied the drawing, his thoughts far away. “I think she’s some pale-haired barbarian from one of those northern tribes great Caesar conquered, more animal than woman. She eats. She sleeps. She mates. She kills.”

The Conqueror raised an eyebrow at that, a sharp retort on her tongue, but Caesar cut her off. “It’s just a name. Every gladiator gets one. It doesn’t mean anything.”

She glared at him, still fuming at the senator’s unflattering assessment, but sounds from a darkened arch across the yard drew her attention. House guards emerged dragging the stumbling gladiator to the edge of the corral.

She looked much less formidable in person than in the ring, barely coming up to the warlord’s shoulders. Without armor she seemed almost slight, in spite of the hard muscle that flexed beneath the rough brown tunic. At least she was wearing something. Darkly the Conqueror wondered who decided painting her like her namesake and pitting her naked against a lion would make good entertainment.

The Leopard looked as if she’d come straight from the Forum, face and arms grimy with sweat and smeared paint and gritty sand, hair plastered back with dried yellow mud, a soiled

cloth binding wounds on her forearm, black blood crusted on her sword hand. In her grogginess, the woman looked barely past her twentieth summer, hardly the seasoned combatant the Conqueror had expected. A breath of disappointment fluttered through her. Scowling, she resigned herself to toying with the woman to draw out her enjoyment.

Manacled hands blocked the glare of the torches, dull eyes drifting from one face to another without comprehension. Perhaps it was the lingering grip of Morpheus addling her wits that she remained standing in Caesar's presence, even after her escort saluted and bowed. The flat of a blade across the back of her legs corrected the error, dropped her hard to her knees. She blinked at him, eyes glazed, slowly dipped her chin in a bow.

"Rise." He turned to his guest. "What is your pleasure?"

The Conqueror sighed. "I'm curious to try one of these stubby little blades you call swords." Smoothly she crossed to a weapons rack, withdrew one of the wooden practice swords and gave it a few experimental swipes.

"And the Leopard?"

The Conqueror eyed the gladiator, remembered her preference the first day she saw her fight. "Give the *dimachaera* her twins. She'll need the extra help."

Guards jerked the slave to her feet and unchained her, placed a pair of wooden gladii in her hands, then stepped away. The Conqueror swung the sword a few more times, adjusting to the unfamiliar weight and speed of the short blade, a wicked gleam in her eye. The sleep-drunk woman didn't move, stared at her vacantly.

"Are you stupid? Get your guard up. I won't warn you twice."

The gladiator watched her, mesmerized. The senator cleared his throat. "Apologies, Conqueror. Perhaps great Caesar did not explain. The Leopard doesn't speak, understands commands little better than the beast she is named after. She's no match for your prowess. I'll send for another—"

"I don't want another." The animal could fight and would, or face the beating of her life. She spun and backhanded her with the flat of her wooden blade.

It never connected. Instinctively the Leopard's gladius blocked the blade inches from her temple. The Conqueror grinned, shoved the gladiator back and flew at her.

Her attacks came fast and hard, making sure the gladiator knew this was no practice round. The Leopard barely kept pace, her wooden weapons blocking or deflecting blows with little room to spare, but she didn't fall for any of the Conqueror's usual tricks. She was cautious, this gladiator, with a fighting style that was definitely not Roman. Sometimes hard, sometimes soft, sometimes straight lines and angles, sometimes sinuous circles, she proved to be unpredictable and deliciously difficult to hit.

But a frown began to tug at the corners of the Conqueror's mouth. When a strike threatened the Leopard's left she would turn ever so slightly, withdraw rather than block. With a snarl the Conqueror cut low, locking up one blade, then kicked high, her unblocked boot easily smashing across the Leopard's face. Only a quick jerk back kept the gladiator from being dropped like a stone; she spun and reset her fighting stance, eyes watering as blood poured from her nose.

Truly angry now, the Conqueror swung high, grabbed the predictable counter and swung again, the flat of her blade smacking the shoulder that didn't—couldn't—raise a weapon to block. The gladiator grunted, body tense, face bloody, eyes hooded.

Disgusted, she flung the swords to the dirt, grabbed the gladiator's shoulder to feel out the damage. "This is pointless. She's injured. Why wasn't this looked after?" The Leopard's pale eyes—were they green?—dilated with pain but she held still, allowed the prodding.

"Begging your pardon, but our house doctor assures me she's fine—"

"Clearly not." Bending the elbow, she expertly rolled the shoulder over and into socket with an audible pop. No sound came from the Leopard, just a flare from those balefire eyes. She peeled down the wrap on the woman's sword arm, poked at the inflamed scratches. "These need to be cleaned and stitched."

"Our most humble apologies—"

"Don't apologize. Fix it. I want her healthy when I beat her." She shook her head, half at herself. What difference would a few days' healing make? The girl hardly seemed worth the wait. But she'd been feeling tense and restless, and the fight—short as it was—offered sweet distraction from her less palatable duties. And she admitted feeling...curious? Yes, curious. Even after losing the match, the slave refused to back down. Something lurked behind those flat eyes, some force of will beaten down but not snuffed out. The feral thing consented to the Conqueror's ministrations. She did not submit.

In Greece, none but the Conqueror's highest-ranking officers dared defy her, and those often did so with a stink of fear. No such foul scent here. This gladiator—this Leopard in the guise of a woman—did not fear death, and did not fear her. A tingle crawled up the warlord's neck. Was that the almost forgotten thrill of a challenge, of new territory to be conquered? She clucked her tongue, savoring some lost flavor between her teeth.

Gracchus interrupted her thoughts. "We shall prepare her for your return."

House guards came and stripped away the gladiator's armor, manacled her wrists together. Eyes shrouded once more, they never left the Conqueror, even as guards dragged her back through the darkened archway.

## 4 Oriens Placidus

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### A Quiet Morning

Early morning made the practice yard a crowded place. Aspiring gladiators ran through their routines, the sweat of their efforts cooled by the lingering chill of morning. Servants and slaves ported great pottery jugs of food and drink into the stores, prepared the afternoon meal, washed clothing for the senator's household. Everyone worked quickly, eager to finish the heavy chores before the heat of the afternoon sun sucked the life out of the air.

The slave quarters below were therefore unusually quiet, and one gladiator made the most of it. In a rare moment of indulgence, diligent hands methodically cleansed every inch of skin with a scrap of cloth dipped in lemon water. The astringent cut through layers of filth and greasepaint from the practice yard and the arena, exposed tanned skin flushed pink with brutal scrubbing, but it was no bath. Stained by lampblack, no amount of scouring entirely removed the spots of her alter ego, as if she were the Leopard and it was the woman they painted on.

Gingerly she felt out the bloated nose she'd reset in the oppressive dark, rubbed the swelling down with watering eyes until satisfied she'd gotten it straight enough. A greasy salve scorched her nostrils with the reek of urine, burned the jagged edges of skin under the stitches on her forearm, but at least the lips grew back together with no hint of yellow discharge.

Body clean and wounds tended, she ran through some exercises, tentatively testing the questionable shoulder. It grumped when lifted, more sore than injured. She could raise her elbow at least level with her shoulder, even higher if absolutely forced. It would be weak for some time, but it functioned. Satisfied, she moved to the well in the center of the slaves' quarters, drew up a fresh bucket of water for a drink and a cool splash on the face, set to rinsing caked mud from her hair.

A sound behind her. Before she could turn rough hands shoved her forward. She caught herself on the stone rim of the well, unable to let go without plunging head first down the shaft.

"Keep still, whore."

She recognized the gladiator's voice, knew what he wanted. She did not keep still, tried to elbow back but the manacles at her wrists snapped taut, almost jerked her supporting arm out from under her. She caught herself, barely, shoulder stabbing warning, found herself teetering over the edge of the well. Without leverage, it was all she could do to hold on as she felt him jerk up her tunic, force his dry erection into her.

Any noise that tried to claw out of her throat dammed up behind clenched teeth. She struggled to relax, open herself, move with him, anything to ease the burn as he reamed her.

"That's a good *canicula*. I knew you wanted this. Much better than that old man's tiny prick, ain't it?"

He should have kept his mouth shut. The ‘little bitch’ took a steadying breath between bruising thrusts, then let go, grabbing the hand at the back of her neck as they both pitched forward. The man swore, had to catch himself while she dangled over the dark hole, tried to roll away from the long drop.

Chains wrapped around her throat, yanking her head back and arching her spine with each lunge of his hips. Desperate fingers clawed at the links, tried to wedge underneath to allow any scrap of blood and air to pass. Then, sound and sight dimming, she willed herself to stop fighting and let him take her.

She lost some time. When the blackness lifted she lay on the floor beside the well, choking down great gulps of air down her swollen throat, head pounding so hard her vision pulsed dark with each heartbeat. Between slick legs her opening smoldered like a raw bloody scrape.

It took a few moments to push herself up on one elbow, the other, drag her knees beneath her. She pushed herself up and, once sure shaky legs would support her, walked slowly up the stairs out of the slaves’ quarters, her expression as opaque as a brackish pool.

White morning sun brought another moment’s blindness. Through the chattering and bustle she found him, talking with other gladiators and grinning. As calmly and steadily as her legs could manage, she strolled across the practice yard, picked up a wooden sword, and in two swift steps leapt upon the gladiator’s back, plunging the dull tip through his neck.

Even as the house guards pulled her away she pounded the pommel of the broken sword into the dead man’s dented skull.

## **5 Promissio Senatoris**

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### **The Senator’s Promise**

As the Senator’s house came into view, the Conqueror felt a familiar spring in the balls of her feet, a lightness of anticipation that she hadn’t felt since her last visit. No, before. Like she hadn’t felt since the morning her army took Egypt.

Egypt. Her last great campaign. That was more than a year ago, her last expansion after unifying Greece under her banner. And then...there was only Rome.

Oh, there had been skirmishes, tactical maneuvers to establish boundaries. But as much as it pained her to admit, the Republic had grown strong under Caesar’s military campaigns, its coffers fat, its legions numerous and battle-tested, its might brimming. Greece simply didn’t have the resources to confront the beast head on. Not that the Republic did not have its weaknesses. The greatest one walked not a few paces before her, and she secretly amused herself with the thought of his swollen head bouncing down the winding paved thoroughfare. But Rome was a

Hydra; where one head was cut off, two more grew to replace it. She strategized day and night for the tactics, the weapons that might kill the Hydra.

So she would tolerate this one smug little head—for now.

The doors opened to the senator's *domus*. The Conqueror swept past the slaves, servants and even Caesar himself, already unclipping her cloak and readying herself for combat.

Senator Gracchus flew into the room, winded and flushed. "Caesar! Conqueror! I had not expected you back so soon."

"Call it happy circumstance. I look forward to the evening's entertainment."

"Ah, yes." He licked his lips nervously. She felt a dark shadow settle on her face, knew she would not like what this weasel was about to say. "I regret to inform you that your sparring partner has not completely healed—"

She closed the distance, towered over the senator. "I don't care if she is completely healed. Can she fight? Or has something else happened that I should know about?"

He blanched. "N-no, Conqueror. It's just...I thought you wanted a challenge. She's hardly a match for your martial prowess in her current state."

Disappointment ate away her earlier buoyancy. Eyeing the frail senator, she fingered the worn pommel of her sword and found herself musing over entertainment of a wholly difference sort. The senator swallowed and backed away. "I will prepare her. Perhaps you will find her...satisfactory."

## 6 Stultitia Domini

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### The Master's Folly

Torchlight filtered through the tiny window, followed by the sound of keys in the door. She tried to rouse, force eyes open, pay attention, prepare. For what, she didn't know, but she could guess it wouldn't be pleasant. Guards yanked her up off the floor, dragged her out of the tiny cell to suddenly stand face to face with the Master.

He eyed her bare flesh, not liking what he saw. "Wake up."

A bucket of water doused her head to toe. She jerked and sputtered, shook water from her eyes, forced her vision to focus on him.

"That's better. You have a match to fight."

Shivering, she stared disbelieving at the darkness of night at the end of the stairs. A slap stung her, brought her barely banked glare back to her owner.

“You *will* fight.” Hard grey eyes softened, the way they had the night he first saw her waiting in his chambers. He walked around her, out of sight, but she didn’t need her eyes to feel his hands hovering over her back. The heat radiating from his palms was enough to burn her raw flesh. “Damned unfortunate thing, this,” he said softly. “All of this. I can honestly assure you I wish none of it had ever happened.”

His apology rang hollow. In her mind’s eye she could still see him staring at her, his face twisted in disgust at his once prized, now ruined possession as the house guard delivered lash after lash.

His tone turned cold as Tartarus. “But you will fight. You will put on a good show for her, and if she’s pleased, she may let you live. And if you hurt her...” He stepped in front of her, debating his next words. “I know many more men who would like to know you as I have, none of them as gentle as your last lover. I’m certain I can line up enough of them to fuck you in every orifice every hour of every day until your insides fall out your cunt. Do you understand?”

He used that voice, the one that promised to follow through on every word. And he was a man who never broke his promises.

He watched her, waiting for an answer. Mechanically she nodded.

“Good. Fix her up.” He lifted her chin to examine the marks. “And make sure those are covered.”

She already wore full armor with a scarf around her neck when they led her up the ramp to the yard. She squirmed inside the cuirass, trying to unstick the coarse tunic from oozing welts, find a position where the stiff leather didn’t press too hard on her tender back.

Caesar’s guest paced there, wooden gladius in hand, slashing impatiently. Her quick, fluid movements seemed almost wild, but the grip she held on the hilt spoke of complete control and absolute will. The slave’s eyes flicked to Caesar, casually leaning upon a rail to enjoy the evening’s entertainment. Across the yard stood the Master, seemingly cowed into silence by the ill-temper of his guests.

All movement stopped, and the warrior woman fixed her eyes on the gladiator appraisingly. Her skin twitched under the scrutiny, tingled as if scraped by invisible fingernails up and down her flesh. She retreated inside herself, fronted a look of detached indifference to meet the gaze, about this match, her opponent, her owner, Caesar, anything but simply surviving. There was truth in that, enough to make the expression convincing.

The warrior cut loose with a shrill battle cry as she flipped through the air. The first few strikes almost overwhelmed the gladiator. With effort she found the woman’s timing, blocking and deflecting each blow while learning her tactics.

Her opponent knew it and pressed the attack, driving her back toward the wooden fence rails, launching a powerful chop downward just as the slave ran out of room to retreat. Instead she sidestepped, the blade striking so close that splinters peppered her cheek. Hairs stood up on the back of her neck as she registered the snapped rail. Her opponent's strength was undeniable; a single blow would debilitate, even kill. As if reading her mind, the warrior woman cut a feral grin; she was only getting started.

She came in again, varying her angles of attack, executing wild combinations unlike any the gladiator had ever seen. She wasn't sure which surprised her more, that she managed to keep up, or that she almost didn't. More than once an unexpected thrust or slash caught her off guard, forcing her to dodge hard to avoid getting hit. One particular thrust forced the Leopard to writhe out of the way, and suddenly she found herself inside the woman's long reach, at the perfect range for an elbow to the jaw—

She jumped back, shaking her head, glancing at the Master. If he saw her near-mistake, he made no expression. Her distraction cost her; a spinning backfist cracked across her face, pain detonating in her broken nose. Only a rapid pivot and retreat saved her from the side thrust meant to knock her out of the practice corral. As it was, the kick to her solar plexus through the hard leather breastplate knocked the wind from her lungs. She staggered back, panting around frothy blood filling her nose, cursing her own stupidity, cursing the Master for hobbling her.

The warrior arched one taunting eyebrow, waiting, daring her to do something. She willed the fire in her face to pass, settled back into that careful mask she wore in the arena. Swords struck again, glancing off each other so hard and fast the smell of burning wood filled the courtyard. The gladiator backed away, staying just out of the warrior's long reach, forcing her to advance. But the dark warrior was no amateur. Unlike the spearmen in the arena, the tall woman moved in carefully, wary of over-extending and being lured off balance. Still, the attack never let up, a flurry of sword strikes interwoven with fists and feet in a tapestry of incredible skill. Disquiet raced through her, and excitement.

The onslaught was not seamless. Gradually she began to feel small openings in her opponent's guard. Feel, like an itch that demanded to be scratched. An over-extended chin, a vulnerable joint, an exposed midsection drew her like a moth to its own fiery destruction. Only stepping away eased the itch, dampened the urge that surged through her to counterattack.

Her reserve only provoked the woman. Deliberately the Conqueror's sword raked across angry stitches, setting the gladiator's arm alight. A moment's haze clouded her vision, and in that moment she felt her calf bump against the fence rail, found herself outmaneuvered again with nowhere to run.

An elbow swung at her face. Instinctively she ducked under the powerful blow and shot away, her wooden sword drawing a grunt of pain as it rammed into the warrior's armored belly.

She froze, surprised and horrified. The warrior woman bent over double, the wind knocked from her chest, purple rage building under her exquisite features. A black grin broke out on Caesar's face. Her owner blanched white, then flushed red, veins bulging on his forehead.



Time to die.

She didn't move when the woman came at her, didn't block, didn't even flinch. She stared into those scorching eyes, felt the faintest relief knowing her death would be quick. Instead she found herself stumbling back, a fist knotted in the scarf around her neck, shoving her faster than she could keep up to slam against the railing.

White pain seared through her lacerated back; she stiffened, clamped down on the hiss that squeezed past her locked jaw. With a twist the scarf tightened on an already swollen throat, but she willed herself to be still, welcomed the spots of color that splashed ever darker in her vision.

"What's this?" the woman's velvet voice growled.

The grip loosened, then pulled the scarf away. She tucked her chin, but a fist tangled in her hair and jerked her head back, displaying the flowering bruises for everyone to see. Particularly the Master.

Beyond her own panting, she heard not a breath from the assembly. No one moved, fearful of the warrior's anger.

"What is this?" Slightly louder this time. Her pale blue eyes raked those assembled in the courtyard, settling on the senator. "Who did this?"

The senator glowered at his property. "A remnant of her last match."

"You lie. These are choke marks. Who did this?" She let go and the Leopard sagged, rubbing her throat as the warrior turned on the senator, her spine rigid with rage.

"A gladiator. In practice today. A lucky grab."

Her speed astonished the Leopard. In four long strides she crossed the courtyard, grabbed him by the neck and heaved him up against a wall. Gods, the woman was mad, threatening to murder a senator over one battered slave.

House guards closed on her, swords drawn. Outnumbered three to one, the Conqueror's escort drew in kind, encircling their ruler. Caesar's men tensed, hands on their pommels. A flick of his wrist held them.

"Who?"

"I don't know!" he squeaked.

She snarled, squeezing his windpipe. One of his guard stepped forward; her men raised their swords.

“That’s enough.” Caesar stepped closer, his expression—his entire being—promising consequences for any rash action.

The woman shot Caesar a warning look, the point of her sword making clear her opinion of his consequences. The Leopard, on the other hand, did not doubt his next actions would bring the warrior great suffering, with or without laying a hand to flesh. Because of her.

“He’s dead,” she croaked.

All eyes turned to her. A nervous glance at her owner, and at Caesar; the consul cocked his head curiously at her, as if noticing a mosquito for the first time. The senator, more than anyone else, looked at her as if she’d sprouted the three heads of Cerberus itself. “You...speak?”

She opened her mouth, thought she should say more but found her head empty. After such a long separation, words abandoned her. The succor of silence still clung to her; rejection of that steady companion seemed more frightening than triumphant. This was madness, speaking now, in front of Caesar, the Master. Especially the Master. Only his look of shock and his threat ringing in her ears made her glad to speak.

The woman looked from her to the Master, back to her, something dark and unreadable in her eyes. Then she let him go, tossed the sword in the dirt. “You don’t deserve a fighter like her. I’ll give you five times what you paid for her.”

The Leopard stared, not believing her ears.

From somewhere the Master drew a swell of confidence. “She’s worth far more than that in winnings alone—”

Her hands lashed out, jabbed him three times in the neck. He dropped to his knees, gasping, manicured fingernails clawed long gashes into his neck as if tearing at invisible hands. Twin rivulets of dark blood oozed from his nostrils. The slave stared at them, transfixed, conflicted between the urge to defend the only security she knew and the thrill of watching him die.

The dark warrior bent down in his face. “She’s worth nothing to you if you’re dead. *Three* times what you paid for her, and don’t make me reconsider again.”

He nodded vigorously, beyond speech. Two more jabs and a twist and he collapsed to the ground, gulping air.

Caesar eased back, smiling. “A wise decision, Conqueror.”

The gladiator’s gaze snapped to the woman. Not just any woman. Xena. Conqueror of Greece. Destroyer of Nations. Slayer of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. And Caesar’s greatest enemy.

She was suddenly glad for the rail that supported her.

The Conqueror turned on Caesar. "Negotiations will conclude tonight, with or without a treaty. Captain Marcus, arrange payment, then escort my new slave to the ship and tell Captain Bellerophon to prepare to sail."

And then she was gone. The gladiator stared after her, too dazed to feel cold metal clamp down on her wrists.

## II Ab Scylla ad Charybdis

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From a Rock to a Hard Place

### 7 Super Nave

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Aboard

It was several candlemarks after midnight when the Conqueror returned to her ship. Escort in tow, she plowed up the gangplank, fingers already working on the knots of her bracers. Captain Bellerophon met her as she stepped aboard, saluted smartly.

“Are we ready?”

“All supplies are aboard, Conqueror. We can clear the harbor before sunrise.”

“Do it.” She brushed past him, tired and tense, intent on her cabin and bed.

“Your purchase is waiting in your quarters,” he called after her.

The gladiator. She’d almost forgotten; the match seemed days ago. She rubbed her eyes. “Not tonight. Put her below with the stores.”

“By your wi—”

“Belay that.” Her forehead creased, caught in her own conflict. “Leave her. For now.”

Her indecision clearly surprised the captain. He covered it quickly. “By your will.”

She ground her teeth, swept across the deck and through the narrow door under the wheel housing. One of the bracer knots refused to come loose. "Niklos!"

A hanging lantern swung lazily, illuminating a small cabin furnished with a padded berth covered in silk sheets, a table next to a box of charts, and a certain fair woman. The cabin offered no rings for attaching manacles, so her chains were looped over the rudder arm drifting just under the ceiling beams, forcing her to stand or hang by the wrists. She stood, muscles in her arms bunching with the effort to stay on her feet. Still in armor, she swayed with the light rocking of the boat, head resting in the crook of her elbows, black blood crusted down lips and chin from the battered nose, dull eyes watching the Conqueror.

Who dropped her gaze, pushed past the woman to fling one bracer on the bed and fight with the stubborn knot. "Niklos!" The damnable tangle was rock hard, and after a few seconds of scrabbling at it ineffectively, she drew her dagger.

She jumped, blade pointed at the slave who'd stepped close, held out one hand. Cautiously the Conqueror presented the bracer, dagger ready, allowed the slave to pull her closer and set to work. For a gladiator, her small calloused fingers were surprisingly gentle and patient. As she fumbled in the dim light, the Conqueror took a closer look at her latest acquisition.

It had been a mistake to call her slight. In spite of her small build, hard muscles defined every inch of her arms and legs, and having seen her stripped bare in the arena, she knew the shaped curves and abdominal ridges of the leather breastplate were a fairly accurate representation of what lay beneath. She looked up, eyes the color of poor man's jade meeting the Conqueror's gaze unflinchingly.

They stayed like that, still, quietly evaluating one another.

"Mistress!"

Niklos rushed in, almost breathless, dropped to both knees and bowed low.

"Where have you been?" Irritated, she held out the bracer, only to find it loose. She looked back at the gladiator, but the woman had already moved away, eyes shuttered and distant.

The youth gasped for air. "I was in the hold. Captain Bellerophon asked me to record your purchases in the log. I came as soon as I heard you call."

A grunt. "Help me out of this."

He rose, took the bracer and arm guards and sword belt, unbuckled the side straps and held the armor while she unhooked the clasps in front. As soon as she was clear of it she sighed, rolled her head and shoulders around as if free of Atlas' globe. The war skirt and boots followed as Niklos laid out a clean shift. "Would you like the cook to prepare anything for you?"

"Gods, no. I've had enough rich Roman food to last me all the way to Corinth."

He gathered her armor and weapons. “Do you need anything else, Mistress?”

“Leave those. Just in case. You can clean them tomorrow.”

He arranged them neatly on the floor next to the bed, sword on top, then bowed. He was almost to the door when she stopped him. “What about her?”

His eyes darted to where the chained woman stood, regarded her with a tinge of trepidation. “I’m sorry, Mistress. I tried to prepare her for your return, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Wouldn’t let you?” She arched an eyebrow as she contemplated the dangling fighter. “She smells like...” —*blood, sweat, woman*— “...sewage. Take care of it.”

“By your will.” He puffed up his chest, stepped toward the slave. Her eyes slitted, and when he reached for the buckles of her armor a kick knocked him back against the wall. She faced him down, teeth bared, legs set to fight. Regaining his wind, Niklos bravely reached again, though it looked like doing so might cost him a finger.

“Enough! *Desistere!*” She raised a hand to beat that impudent streak out of her, found herself looking into green eyes that yielded, expecting punishment. It was not the Conqueror she resisted, but the boy.

Even so, punishment *was* expected. A sharp punch snapped the slave’s head back, buckled her knees. Slowly she pushed herself to her feet, locked eyes with her keeper. The Conqueror could count on one hand the number of people who dared look her in the eye. Even her generals kept their gazes elsewhere. But this one...she seemed determined to stare down her own death. Which could be arranged, of course. A dark chuckle rumbled out of her. “She seems to enjoy her circumstances. Leave her.”

He bowed, closed the door behind him as he left. The Conqueror regarded the clean shift, tossed it on the table and reclined in the berth, still in her leathers. Her eyes drifted to the slave swaying with the rocking of the ship, eyes closed, fresh red dripping from her chin to the deck. The gentle drip-drip slowly gave way to the sound of sails unfurling above, gradually tilting the ship as the canvas caught the light breeze and pulled them away from Rome.

## 8 Praedatora

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### Hunters

She woke with a jolt, found herself swinging from hands she couldn’t feel. Drunkenly she hauled her legs under her, a challenge with the lurching floor, pulled herself up to her feet. Blood flowed to her arms once more; slowly one set of aches made way for another.

She leaned her head back, rolled strained shoulder blades, twisted numb wrists. A wave pitched the boat, and another unpleasant feeling pushed its way up her throat. She caught herself before she gagged, forced it back down.

Voices filtered down to her, mutterings from above. Booted feet hurried across the deck, and hoarse whispers barked commands. She looked over at the bed. The Conqueror lay there, eyes slitted open, listening. How long had she been awake? The woman got up, already had her skirt and breastplate on when the knock came.

Captain Bellerophon stuck his head in, letting in the dim pink light before dawn. He, like her owner, spoke Greek. "Conqueror, a ship approaches. Roman."

Xena nodded, buckled on her sword belt and gathered the rest of her armor. She didn't spare the slave even a glance, blew out the lantern and latched the door shut behind her, smothering the cabin in darkness.

Darkness could do strange things to a mind. Every thump of water against the hull became a battering ram, every snap of canvas the crack of a whip, every creak of rope the groan of a vessel gone rotten and unseaworthy.

She'd held still while her new owner slept. Now in the oppressive blackness she paced, testing the two-and-a-half strides she could take before the chain pulled her up short. She could just touch the bed and table with her toes, but could think of no plan beyond that.

Voices joined in a rallying cry above, followed by the unmistakable ring of steel meeting steel. Heart racing, her wrists began to work inside the manacles, twist and pull on already raw skin. The left restraint was slightly looser than the other, and she focused on that one, hoping to could pull free with a little lubrication.

Several heavy thumps made her jump. The deck steadied beneath her, and fearsome battle cries heralded a boarding party. Her head snapped up as a shout filtered down through the din above: "*Reperite Pardam!*"

She didn't want to know what they planned to do with her when they found her.

With a jump she caught hold of the rudder arm, swung her legs up to clip around it. More than a hand span of space separated the beam from the underside of the deck. With a heave, she hooked one thigh over the top, then inched her way up to lay upon the beam. In her armor she barely fit, the stiff leather digging into the welts on her back, allowing her to take only the shallowest of breaths. She flattened herself out, pulled everything up until the only thing visible from the door was the chain of her shackles, the only sound her strained breaths and the twisting of her hand against the restraint.

Light seeped under the door, a line of pink cut by passing shadows. Distantly she recognized the ululating battle cry of the Warrior Princess. She'd heard stories of that cry that chilled the soul, heard it for herself before she'd known who the warrior woman was. But it seemed far

away, too far away, and she suddenly had visions of being forgotten, left behind, trapped on a drowning ship. A tiny noise squeaked out, primal and fearful, and she jerked more desperately against the manacles. She couldn't breathe, couldn't get her hand free, couldn't escape, couldn't fight.

No. With a steady breath she pushed the nausea back, focused on her hand, on the iron grip on her bones, on skin that could bind or slide with the right help. Her dry mouth somehow conjured spit; it mixed with the widening ring of blood, let her hand slip just a fraction of an inch further.

The door slammed open. She froze. A Roman in piecemeal armor stepped in, scanning the corners. She held her breath, allowing only the tiniest gasps to feed her starved lungs, her heart thumping so loud she was certain he would hear it. He opened cupboard doors, lifted the down pallet with the tip of his sword. Her hand throbbed, her fingers growing fat and stiff without circulation. Just tiny breaths, nothing more.

A bead of blood dripped from her wrist, drifted down like a feather caught in an ethereal wind. It splattered against his armor, loud as a footfall. He craned his head to look.

The chain wrapped around his neck, jerked him up off the ground high enough for his head to hit the beam. Her hand screamed in agony and she couldn't hold him, but it didn't matter. He crumpled to the floor, unconscious or dead.

She couldn't relish the victory; two more came in, saw her right away. She swung from the beam, planted both feet in the first man's face. If the kick didn't knock him out, the crack of the back of his head against the wall did; bonelessly he slid to the floor. She landed on the deck; hand caught like a paw in a snare, she fought back rising panic, yanked hard against the unyielding metal. The second man clambered past his friend, came after her. She smashed a boot across his sword hand, sent it clattering across the room. He didn't give up, charged her bare-handed. Jumping to grab the rudder arm, she wrapped her legs around the man's neck.

Bad idea. Thick shoulder guards made it difficult to get her legs under his chin and around his throat. She squeezed anyway, smirked at the sight of his eyes bulging, his cheeks and forehead turning crimson between her knees.

A punch to the ribs knocked the grin from her face, set her gasping for air. His turn to twist bunched cheeks into a smile as he knuckle-punched her again between breastplate and backplate. With her arms stretched overhead she could do nothing to block it, nothing to stop the slow shrill wheeze of air fleeing her lungs. Another punch and all strength fled her grip on the beam; the manacles snapped tight, her wrist and hand bearing the bulk of her weight. Another screech from the trapped hand; nearly mad with pain, she could do nothing but lock her ankles together and squeeze, willing his skull to crack like an egg between her thighs.

With a muffled bellow he tried to pull away from her, until she thought her shoulders, her elbows, every joint in her arms might separate.



The skin of her hand tore free.

He stumbled under her sudden weight. Before he could recover she smashed the manacles against his temple; they both dropped to the deck.

She could hardly breathe, lay there for several moments before the stench of the man lent her strength enough to shove him off. She hurt, clutched an elbow to her side where the raider had punched her; sucked air into her lungs in tiny gasps. A glance at her hand almost made her heave; knuckle bones gleamed white where the skin peeled back.

Didn't matter. She was free. She struggled to her feet, found a sword, stumbled out of the cabin into the glow of morning.

Bodies of the dead and wounded littered the deck, obstacles to be stepped over for those still thick in the fight. Grappling hooks lined one railing, bound them to another ship where more sailors traded blood. From somewhere on that ship came the wild call of the Conqueror.

She looked further still, spied hazy cliffs not too far distant. Without the armor she might make it. She'd never been a powerful swimmer as a child, but with this strong body and stronger will—

A scream overhead caught her ear. Partway up the climbing netting, the Conqueror's servant scrambled away from a Roman. Fingers caught his foot and he screamed again, hanging on desperately until he kicked the large hand free.

She was three rungs up the net before she realized what she was doing. She shook her head, looked back at the beckoning shore.

“Help!”

The cry grated on her senses. She blocked it out to focus evaluate her chances. She'd never swum such a distance, and with her ribs and shoulder already hampered...a faint breeze carried the scent of fresh hay and freedom. She could do it. Even if she had to strip naked and float the whole way on her back she would make it. She climbed down—

“Someone help me! Please!”

A sandal fell from above. Her eyes darted between cliffs and the fight overhead.

They would probably catch her before she ever reached land.

She climbed as fast as she could, willing shaky limbs and throbbing ribs to obey. Above her they scrambled up into the crow's nest, circled the mast. The raider's sword bit into the rail, rained wood chips down on her. Niklos looked like he hardly had enough muscle to hold a sword, but he could move. One swipe meant to take his head bent him backward over the railing.

He couldn't right himself fast enough, and the man pounced on him, pinning him there, sword raised.

She heaved herself into the nest in time to see the servant's legs flip over the rail. She lunged past the Roman, dove between the rail supports, reaching—

Caught a fistful of cloth. The linen ripped as it snapped taut, but held. Niklos grabbed hold of her arm, his dark eyes wide with fear.

A growl warned her of the raider's charge. Pinned to the platform by the weight at the end of her arm, it was all she could do to block the blows that rained down on her. A vicious heel kick to the groin doubled him over. Pain fought with rage in his flat-nosed face; rage won and he lunged at her. She redirected his thrust but couldn't roll out of the way, jerked as it sliced into her thigh.

Through red haze she saw her opening, dragged her blade deep through the muscles of his inner thigh. He grunted, yanked his sword free and came at her again and again. No heroics; she blocked swing after swing, protecting herself, waiting. A river of life ran hot down his leg, flooding the tiny platform. Gradually his skin grew pale, and by the time he stumbled, it was too late. He slumped back against the rail, slid down on unwilling legs, surprised and furious at her. She knew the look, nodded solemnly at him, respectful and understanding but not sorry. Never sorry. Even those expressions drained away, until only his eyes sparkled. He died like she hoped to die, looking the enemy in the eye.

A cry brought her around, and she rolled over to look down. Niklos' hand slid down her blood-slicked arm; he whimpered. She wouldn't, couldn't let go of the tunic, her gory hand a white-knuckled knot, but his hands continued to lose purchase. Even after she lowered the other end of the manacles to him, his red hands kept slipping on the metal, link by link.

"Help me," he whispered, liquid welling in his eyes. She pulled, but he weighed as much as she and her body refused, too tired and hurt to rally. He tried to climb up the chain, slid even further. She wrapped her legs around the mast and tugged again, felt a stitch pop on the failing tunic.

His white eyes pleaded with her. She sucked in a breath, willed her body to obey. Miraculously it did, lifting him by inches toward safety.

The fabric tore. She lunged, came up empty-handed as he fell away into the dawn.

An arm reached out of nowhere, snatched him as he flew by. Startled, she craned her neck to see. On the climbing lines below, the Conqueror held the terrified man to her like a child.

She rolled onto her back then, eyes closed, heart fluttering in her chest. Long enough for the battle euphoria to wear off, be replaced by another sort of lightheadedness.

A thumb peeled back one eye. She squinted. Her owner leaned over her, poking at her leg, arching an eyebrow at her bloody hand, the empty manacle. Xena smirked, perhaps not unkindly. In one smooth motion the gladiator found herself hauled up and slung across the powerful woman's shoulders like a sack of grain. The deck lurched many feet below; she squeezed her eyes shut, laced stiff fingers into the warrior's armor and held on for the long climb down.

A soft pallet caught her. Her owner's pallet in fact, when she opened her eyes to look around. The cabin. She started to sit up but a firm hand pressed her back. "Stay down. I won't tell you twice."

She nodded. Xena took to prodding her leg. The blade had gone all the way through the muscle and out the other side; it was sore, but she'd experienced worse.

"It occurs to me that I don't know your name," murmured her owner as she bent the leg, cleaned the blood away to ready it for stitches. The slave reached to help, had her hands pushed away. "You worked so hard to get free. Don't make me chain you up again."

She lay back, though it took effort to hold still. She'd grown accustomed to tending her own wounds, avoiding the explorations of unwelcome hands. Not that these hands—neither rough nor demanding—were exactly unwelcome. The gladiator lay still, tried to remove herself from the touches, the sting of the stitches, lose herself in the patterns of the wooden ceiling. Instead she found her gaze on the warrior, intent on her needlework. Her hands moved with the experience of thousands of stitches, as confident in healing as they were in killing.

She put the finishing touches on the dressing on the leg, moved to examine the hand. A large patch of skin hung from the first and second knuckle, but it could have been worse. Sour wine coursed over it, made the gladiator jerk and gasp. Her vision hollowed, threatened to go dark completely. The Conqueror's grip was like steel, held her still through several cleansings, pale blue eyes watching her silent suffering curiously.

Xena set the flask down and wrapped the hand with a cloth. "That will infect if you don't keep it clean."

Her hand quivered like a leaf. Gradually the burning subsided, brought giddy relief. She stared at the harsh ruler, raging warrior, skilled healer, enigmatic mistress. Which parts were real and which were show? Was she the cold-blooded Conqueror, or the noble Warrior Princess?

In the practice yard, in the held breath after she'd said, "He's dead," the warrior had looked at her. Looked into her, it seemed, past the Leopard, past the slave. What did she see? *You don't deserve a fighter like her.*

"Gabrielle." The word slipped out, left her uncomfortable at her own admission.

Her owner stared at her. Had she forgotten the question? She mulled it over, tried it out. "Gabrielle." It sounded like smoke when she said it, thick and dangerous. Those piercing eyes studied her face for a long moment. Then she shrugged. "It doesn't suit you. I'm—"

“Xena.”

She blinked. Ice settled into her eyes. “You will address me as Conqueror or Mistress. You may not use that name.”

Again the gladiator wished she’d said nothing. Silence would have spared her this uneasy moment, the conflicted choice between trying to apologize and trying to bite out her own tongue. A stab of discomfort brought her back to the Conqueror’s hands fairly attacking the straps on sides of her breastplate. Gabrielle shook her head, tried to resist the intrusive hands.

The Conqueror’s pale blue eyes bored into her. “Everything of yours is mine. Every hair, every scar, every bruise. Whatever you are hiding, I will find out. Save your strength for a battle that counts.” She considered a moment. “Or shall I have Niklos undress you?”

The Leopard’s contrariness surfaced for just a moment; she pushed it down, sensing the Conqueror didn’t make idle threats. She nodded, held still while the buckles came free. With help she sat up, lifted one arm while the woman slid the armor over her head. Finally free of the rigid leather she sagged, caught her breath as pain flooded her side. She gritted her teeth while Xena worked the tunic up and over her head, waited for the inevitable reaction.

She was somewhat disappointed. Casually the warlord glanced over her back. “Your last owner should have treated these welts sooner.”

So she knew about the beating. Of course she did, the same way she knew about the dislocated shoulder. Just as an artist read the canvas of a painting, the warrior read the canvas of a body, gleaning from subtleties of movement the larger condition.

Sure hands worked liniment into her back. Unlike the wine before, the greasy substance went cold on her skin, took the fire out of tender flesh. She felt a little dizzy leaning against the warrior, her face buried in a world of leather and sweat and sandalwood. She was relieved to lie down again, gladly endured the fingers probing her ribs and hips. The woman chortled. “You look like a map of the Mediterranean.”

The Leopard glanced down. Old and new bruises mingled in a mottled mess, down one side, across her belly, up the other. To her surprise, a sheet covered her lower half, some unexpected indulgence of modesty.

A cloth scoured the blood off her face. Strong hands straightened the nose again, and the warrior finally leaned back, satisfied. “Well, no broken bones that I can find. Just bruises.” She pulled the silk sheet up under her arms and stood.

“I’m sorry.” The gladiator forced the words out, her voice strange in her ears, deeper and rougher than she remembered.

The warrior cocked her head. “What for?”

A deep breath. “Dropping him.”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. Niklos would be dead if not for you.” She turned, put her hand on the door handle. Then softly, over her shoulder, “I want to say tha—” Words hung in the warrior’s throat, as if catching herself on the brink of saying something unforgivable. “That your choice to help him has been noted,” she gruffed, then stepped out of the cabin, pulling the door shut behind her.

The slave closed her eyes, thinking, listening, feeling. The down-filled pallet was as soft as an emperor’s bed. Its softness enveloped her, absorbed the rocking of the boat, lulled her away from vigilance.

A hand lay on her shoulder, startled her back to awareness.

“Sit up. Drink this.”

The tumbler of liquid looked and smelled like fetid pond water. On principle she refused.

“It’s just a precaution. We don’t want his seed growing inside you.”

The gladiator stared up at her, stunned.

Her owner smirked. “I am nothing if not observant. Am I right? Or shall I toss this out?”

The gladiator shut her mouth, downed the entire mug in a single gulp, wincing. As she offered back the cup, the Conqueror took her wrist in hand, unlocked the manacle. “You could have run. You didn’t. The chains stay off until we reach Corinth. Then we’ll see.”

She stood, gathered up the manacles. Thumbed them thoughtfully. “Gracchus must want you back pretty bad to send a ship after us.”

The gladiator’s eyebrows creased, remembering. “Didn’t recognize them. Not Gracchus’ men.”

In two sentences she doubled the number of words she’d spoken. They were important words, words her owner needed know. And by the shadow that passed over her face, the statement’s significance was not lost on the Conqueror.

## 9 Famulus Victricis

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The Conqueror’s Attendant

Xena passed from body to body, her eyes roaming over uniforms, boots, hands, faces, wounds. Occasionally she stopped, turned over a calloused palm, examined the quality of a leather stitch. One guard's arm caught her eye; she pushed up the sleeve of his tunic, noted the tattoo on his shoulder.

"Conqueror."

Bellerophon. The man could be preternaturally quiet when he wanted. "The attackers are all dead. Some of the sailors still live, but they claim to know nothing of their mission."

"We'll see about that."

He waited for her orders. When she said nothing, staring at the body, he took the risk of intruding on her thoughts. "What are you looking for?"

She peered up, looked around, shrugged. "Nothing. Something. A clue." She showed him the tattoo.

"S-P-Q-R." His face darkened.

She stood up, wiping her palms on her leathers. "*Senatus Populusque Romanus*. I've seen it on many of Caesar's soldiers."

"You said these men served the Senator."

She poked one of the bodies with the toe of her boot. "I'd thought so."

"They were searching for the slave?"

"Maybe. For a mission to recover one little slave, they seemed very intent on killing me." She looked around, her hairs standing on end. When her gut twitched, it was dangerous not to listen. "Press those sailors into service and split the crew; send the ship captain and half the guard over to the Roman ship to follow us; you and Captain Marcus will cover his duties here. And throw this mess over the side. It's stinking up my deck."

He saluted. "By your will."

Within a candlemark they were underway again. For a while Xena took watch on the quarterdeck, her eyes aft for signs of pursuit. Sometime later she finally turned the watch over to the ship's commander, made her way down to her cabin.

She stopped short, remembered her bed was not currently her own. She could evict the occupant, of course. But she didn't, made an about-face and headed to the bow. She always liked the feel of salt spray in her face. It conjured memories of simpler, happier times. Clean, direct, uncomplicated. Nothing like the life she led now.

Niklos approached. Unlike Bellerophon, he couldn't take a soft step if his feet were tarred and feathered. A grin tugged at her mouth; she carefully erased it before he came and knelt beside her.

"The cook wishes that you eat, Mistress." He meekly offered a bowl of salami, cheeses, olives, and figs.

"The cook?" She arched an eyebrow.

His eyes downcast, he did not see her silent question, although he perhaps felt it. "He begs you forgive his impertinence. His only thought is for the welfare of Greece."

She smirked. "Oh, very well. For Greece, then."

Eagerly he set the bowl down before her, took for himself a piece of sausage and cheese, an olive and a fig, and happily popped them into his mouth. "The figs are delicious."

She grimaced. "I've eaten enough figs to make me sick. You can have them."

He grinned, handed her a wine skin and gobbled them up quickly. They sat carefully with their backs to the deck, a servant attending to his mistress and nothing more.

She chewed on a small bite of sausage, peeked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Are you recovered, little bird? From your flying lesson?"

His grin faltered. "I'm feeling better. I still get the shakes when I think about it."

"You won't sleep through the night for weeks." She meant to sound amusing. Instead her words came out ominous, unsettling. He paled. She shook her head; sensitivity was never her thing. "Hey. You're alive, right? That's all that matters."

He nodded, but his gaze drifted skyward to the crow's nest. Some part of him was still up there, hanging for his life. She could see it in his eyes.

"Will she be okay?"

"Who?"

"Your new body slave."

"Body slave?" She hadn't even thought about it. What would she do with her newest acquisition?

Niklos flushed, looked away. "I am mistaken, Mistress. Please forgive me."

What *would* she do with her? Why had she even offered to buy her? But she knew the answer to that question before it fully formed in her mind. That old fool didn't deserve an artist like her, had no appreciation for the gladiator's rare talent. She saw it the first time she watched the Leopard fight. And she confessed feeling intrigued. The gladiator was everything Xena wasn't: a close-in fighter, low and rooted, evasive and yielding, cautious and precise, always thinking, tightly controlled. She bought the slave to fight her, to be the whetstone upon which the Conqueror sharpened her skills. To be her favorite new toy, until she broke.

"Mistress? She is okay, isn't she?"

The Conqueror shook her head. "She's fine. She wasn't so hurt that she couldn't save you, right?"

The young man nodded. He looked down, counted items in the bowl. "You still haven't eaten anything, Mistress."

An amused eyebrow crept up into her hairline. "I'm sure you're mistaken, Niklos."

"Yes, Mistress. As always, you are correct. However, your appetite is world-renowned, and the men might begin to spread rumors about your failing health if they see so much as a crumble of cheese left in this bowl."

"I'll have them executed." She only half-joked.

"As the wise Conqueror is known to do. But to not finish this bowl of food is to dishonor the men who fought for you to take these spoils of war."

She shook her head, snatched the bowl from his hands. "You are incorrigible."

A wide smile brightened his entire face. "My worst flaw, Mistress, and one I work daily to erase from my being, that I might serve you better."

"Stop. You're making me ill."

He grinned. "Which brings me to the next pressing affair of state. The Conqueror of Greece must get some rest. In two days we reach Corinth, and there will be many issues that need your immediate and focused attention."

She snorted. "You imitate Vidalis fairly well. Shall I tell him that?"

He dropped the impersonation. "Please?"

"Get some rest? My bed is unfortunately occupied."

"No it's not. She's sleeping on the floor."



Her brow creased. Stubborn thing.

“Please.”

The Conqueror relented. She stood and took the bowl and wineskin back to the cabin, indeed finding the sleeping gladiator pressed against the wall under the table, the red silk sheets wrapped tight around her bare form.

The closed room still reeked of blood, sweat, and liniments. As Niklos removed her armor and leathers, she felt green eyes on her. She stripped down to skin, let Niklos sponge bathe her, not caring what the woman saw. Then she pulled on the clean shift she’d discarded earlier and climbed onto the down-stuffed pallet, buried her face in cool luxury.

The pillow smelled of olive oil, medicinal herbs, and the gladiator’s sun-kissed skin. Meeting the hooded gaze, she felt drawn into some sort of negotiation of the soul conducted in a language she didn’t understand. Those willful green eyes were the last thing she saw before drifting off, dreaming of conversing with her in the more familiar vocabulary of leather, steel, and blood.

## 10 Conlocutio Nocturnum

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### Midnight Conversations

She awoke in stifling dark, the kind that crawled down her nostrils and clogged the depths of her lungs, as if someone held a pillow to her face. She lurched upright, banged her head. The chart table. The cabin. The empty berth. Clutching the sheet around her she stumbled to the door, fumbled with the handle until it opened and she escaped into the night air.

An ocean breeze flitted across flushed cheeks, stole away the cloying heat and sickly sweet smell of the cabin. She sucked in long gulps, rinsing away the lingering panic of her waking. When her head finally realized it was upright, she barely had time enough to lurch to the rail before spewing black potion, bile, and scant else over the side.

Leaning over the edge, feeling cool air on her face, watching dark water slide by the hull as she spat the vile taste from her mouth, she regained a measure of lucidity. It had been—she struggled to count—three days since her last real meal, her reward for surviving the great cat. She’d wolfed it down; some of the Master’s house guards took petty pleasure in cutting those privileges short. Now she struggled to remember what she ate, what it tasted like. It was a stew, if she remembered right, full of overripe vegetables and gristly meat, a shadow of the sumptuous feasts served at the gladiator school. But it was food, and it filled her rarely-full stomach. Achy as she was, she’d fallen asleep that night sated, even grateful, dreamt of the statuesque beauty in Caesar’s box, looking down at her with eyes wilder than the lion’s.

And then the guards woke her in the night. She'd expected to be delivered to the senator's chambers, but instead they dragged her up to the practice yard. She wondered if she were still asleep; waiting for her there was the woman in her dreams. They fought; that had been part of her dream, too. And when those strong hands took hold of her...they were efficient but not indifferent as they put her shoulder back in its socket. She imagined even a hint of gentleness—

Her stomach growled more insistently. Three days since that moment, it reminded her. Three days of stale bread crumbs and water, or nothing at all. Her nose led her to stand, hobble on a stiff bandaged leg toward the hole near the bow of the ship. With effort she descended the stairs into the hold.

The smell of porridge that drew her gave way to a stink far worse than the cabin. Hammocks cradled to Morpheus' bosom dozens of unwashed soldiers and sailors. She froze, almost scrambled backwards up the stairs.

A sloshing sound stopped her, and slowly she inched around the edges of the space to an open barrel with a ladle. The water tasted of pond scum, but she welcomed the wetness in her throat, felt it hit the bottom of her stomach like a fist. Greedily she gulped it down until the foul reek finally overruled her thirst. Prudence suggested she leave then, but that beckoning smell made her stomach gurgle again. The faint light of a hanging lamp revealed the leavings of the last meal, mainly a few scoops of porridge and a slightly moldy hunk of bread. She scooped the porridge into her mouth, hardly chewing before swallowing, gobbled down the bread as quietly as she could and washed it down with a swill from the dank barrel before retreating toward the stairs.

Voices stopped her. Murmurings floated from the rear of the ship where another set of stairs ascended to the open deck. Cursing her curiosity, she limped into the darker recesses of the hold. A silhouette under the moonlit opening made her stop. She crouched down behind giant amphorae, peeking over the edge.

“—she's hardly ever on deck, spends most of her time in that damnable cabin.”

“You must find an opportunity. Night is your best chance. Fewer eyes. I needn't remind you Corinth is less than two days away. If she still lives when this ship docks, your lives are forfeit.”

The dark shape of the speaker pushed past and up the stairs, the faint bulk of armor visible in dim light. Footfalls came closer. The Leopard knotted the sheet around her and pressed herself back in the darkness. When the smaller man walked by, her arm clamped around his throat.

“Conqueror?”

The gladiator blinked, surprised. Perhaps it wasn't her life they meant to take.

“Conqueror, please—”

She clamped down on his throat, squeezing off his words. “Who wants the Conqueror dead? The senator?”

He wheezed, fingernails digging into the muscled forearm at his throat. He tried to elbow back, but she would have none of it, knuckle-punched him in the small of his back until he stopped struggling.

“I heard everything. Who wants me dead?”

“Conqueror, please have mercy! I am no threat to you. Surely you can see that?”

“Speak or die, assassin!” Her arms bulged with the effort of squeezing. Just when she thought she might run out of strength, he gave a noise and she let up ever so slightly. “What did you say?”

“Caesar!”

A rock settled in the bottom of her gut. “Let’s go.”

She manhandled him back the direction he’d come, up the stairs.

They’d barely taken two steps toward the cabin when shouts and drums sounded the alarm. Almost a dozen soldiers appeared out of nowhere, surrounded them on deck. The watch captain, Marcus, placed himself squarely between her and the cabin. “Release him, slave.”

And what would happen then? A slave assaulting a freeman, her word pitted against his? They certainly wouldn’t believe this sailor planned to assassinate the Conqueror. She tightened her grip, set her stance, eyes darting to the soldiers at her left and right. The sailor gurgled in her grasp, his face swelling with the pressure.

“Release him!”

She planned to. When he was unconscious or dead.

A boot shuffled on the deck behind her. Eyes darted over her shoulder and her foot shot back, caught the stealthy soldier square in the throat. His sword clattered to the deck where he fell, writhing and choking.

The others took a reflexive step closer. She clamped down hard on the man’s neck, threatening to snap it, her eyes cold and dangerous. They stopped, looked to the watch captain for orders.

“What is the meaning of this?”

The Conqueror stormed out of the cabin, Niklos in tow. She took in the scene in a heartbeat, plowed through the circle like a raging bull. “Let him go.”

Though the man hung limp in her choke hold, she could still feel his heart valiantly pumping. The soldiers shuffled forward, made braver by the Conqueror's presence. She could obey, and risk death at hands of the soldiers, or she could disobey, and risk death at the hands of her owner.

She released him, her gaze never leaving the Conqueror.

The soldiers swarmed her, slamming her cheek to the deck under a press of bodies. Spots of light exploded under her eyelids; she blinked, dazed, teeth gritted against the large hands that wrenched her sore shoulder as they twisted her arms behind her back. The world lurched and she found herself standing again—hanging really—naked, the sheet torn away in the scuffle.

“Explain yourself,” the warrior growled, making clear the danger if she refused.

The assassin took orders from a man in armor. Her eyes darted from one soldier's face to another; one of these men plotted treason against the Conqueror. If she spoke against the assassin, she would certainly make an enemy of his commander, become a target for assassination herself. And if they did somehow kill the Conqueror, the Leopard would probably pass into the hands of the soldiers and sailors to do with as they pleased. Judging by the expressions on their faces, violation would be the least of her worries.

A backfist cracked across her face. The warrior towered over her, her torchlit face swimming in and out of focus. “Answer me.”

She ran her tongue across her swelling lip and loose teeth, tasted the too-rich red warmth filling her mouth. Spitting it out would certainly enrage the Conqueror further. With effort she swallowed it down, fought the nausea that pushed it back up. She raised her chin, looked her owner in the eye without deceit or defiance.

“Answer me!”

Another backfist to the same spot nearly put her out. Her vision came back slowly to a long rope of red suspended from slack throbbing lips. She raised her head again, resigned to the next blow.

Fingers like steel lashed out almost faster than the slave's eyes could track. Her neck spasmed, clamped down on windpipe and pulse surer than her choke hold on the sailor. Her legs would have buckled had her feet touched the ground.

“You'll be dead in seconds if you don't tell me why you attacked this sailor.”

The invisible noose constricted, made vision go dark and sound turn tinny and distant. Her tongue grew thick in her mouth, her eyes bulged sightlessly. A vice clamped down on her head, promised with each pounding to grind her skull to dust.

“Conqueror! With all due respect...she's mute.”

She couldn't tell who said it. One of the soldiers, perhaps. The Conqueror knew better, of course. So she was shocked when the invisible band around her neck released, flooded her head with enough blood and air to make her swoon.

"Chain her up in the hold."

They clapped her in irons and dragged her below, dumped her naked and shivering, half-conscious among the rats.

## 11 Testimonium Arbitri

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### The Witness's Testimony

The ruler of Greece paced, too wound up to stand still.

"And you say the Leopard attacked you while you were retiring to your hammock?"

"Yes, Conqueror."

"And you didn't lay a hand on her, didn't look inappropriately at her in any way."

"Never, Conqueror. I didn't even know she was there. She snuck up behind me silent as the dead, she did." The Roman sailor rubbed his neck at the thought, dark bruises under his chin.

She exhaled. "You may go."

The sailor did so, eager to be out of the presence of the dreaded woman. She shut her eyes, massaged her temples, willing the buzz clouding her thoughts to go away.

"Perhaps she's an assassin," Marcus mused, his look far away.

She shook her head. "A damned clumsy one, giving herself away over a crewman. No."

Bellerophon cut in, news of the attack still fresh on his flushed face. "Conqueror, she's a slave. A gladiator and killer. No doubt she was sent to the arena to die for her crimes."

"That doesn't make her an assassin, Bellerophon."

"No, but it does make her unstable, unpredictable, and a threat to the Conqueror of Greece. The ruler I've sworn on my life to protect."

She fingered the manacles on the table, thoughtful. "She won't harm me."

Marcus cleared his throat. Quietly, “Your curiosity for this girl aside, how can you be so sure?”

“Because I can feel it. I can’t explain. She’s passed up too many chances to try.”

Marcus shrugged. “Maybe she’s afraid of you.”

The Conqueror snorted. “She’s never shown a scrap of fear to me, of me, about me, or even near me.”

“Then what is she hiding?” the dark-skinned soldier wondered. “You know she can speak. Why doesn’t she? What is she keeping from you? Has she said anything since—?”

“No,” the Conqueror lied. Those few words fallen from hesitant lips were treasures meant for her ears alone. “Marcus, she got free and chose to help rather than escape. She had the chance. Something binds her to me.”

“Perhaps a sworn oath to destroy you,” spat Bellerophon. “Has it occurred to you she’s only biding her time for the surest kill?”

“Of course it has,” she snapped. In truth, the thought hadn’t crossed her mind, not in any meaningful way other than academic conjecture. And even now, confronted with it, her gut wouldn’t allow her to conceive of it. Bellerophon was dead wrong, even if she didn’t have a shred of evidence to prove it. “Your concerns are noted. Dismissed.”

She hadn’t been so curt with her captains in a long time, regretted it almost immediately. They hid their astonishment; Marcus with a curt nod, Bellerophon through a stiff bow. “By your will, Conqueror.”

The door quietly latched shut behind them.

She let his words float in her mind, coalesce into the form of a cunning killer, heart cauterized by years of murder, intent carefully hidden behind a wall of silence and a pair of accursedly soft green eyes.

She slammed her fists down on the table, made everything jump.

“Mistress?” Niklos slipped into the cabin. He knew her well enough not to touch her, not when her rage sat this close to the surface.

“Stay here,” she growled. He shrank back as she stalked past and marched down into the hold, eager to vent.

The accused crouched motionless, her bare back and legs and arms still faintly spotted from her match with the lion. A rat strayed within range of the chains, only to be pounced upon and have its neck snapped. She caught more than she missed.

“You’re better than a ship’s cat. Perhaps I ought to leave you down here a while.”

Her head snapped around, searching the shadows where the Conqueror stood. A shadow passed across the Leopard’s bloody rat-bitten face, lit her eyes with sickly green fire.

“Is that a spark of anger? I didn’t think animals could feel emotion.” She moved languidly, only the swish of leather betraying her presence. She enjoyed the way the eyes strained to follow her, trying to decide if she was predator or prey. She gestured faintly at the briny hold, dark except the moonlit patch where the nude slave hunkered. “Do these accommodations please you? Are they an improvement over your previous sleeping arrangements? Are you more comfortable with your chains than without? No? Perhaps you should not have taken my generosity so lightly.” She closed the distance between them until she squatted down just beyond the shaft of moonlight. “You know I have every reason to execute you. You dishonored me. You assaulted my crewman, resisted my soldiers, refused to answer my questions. I’ve skewered men for less. So I give you a gift. You get one chance to tell me why I should spare you the fate you’ve earned.”

She watched conflict play across taut features, the benefits of speaking battling the security of silence.

“Nothing? No excuses? No pleading? No insults?”

Swollen lips and cheeks shaped words thick and quiet as fog. “He’s plotting to kill you.”

She stared, slowly baring her white teeth in a broad grin. “Plotting to kill me? Who isn’t? Hardly a day goes by that some fool somewhere doesn’t fantasize about my death. Let them try. A pathetic attempt on my life might provide some entertainment. Is that the best story you have to offer?”

The quiet voice rasped, whether from disuse or abuse the Conqueror couldn’t tell. “He took orders from one of the soldiers.”

Her grin faded. She stood. “How do you know this?”

“I heard them talking.”

She circled, brow furrowed. “Which soldier?”

“Couldn’t see. They spoke in the dark.”

“And what were the soldier’s orders?”

She took a deep breath, reciting from memory. ““If she is still alive when we reach Corinth, they will die.””

“They? She?”

“Me, I thought. But when I grabbed him, he was afraid I was you.”

The Conqueror thought it over for long minutes.

“You might be lying. You might have misunderstood.”

The slave shook her head. “He confessed. He said they were sent on orders from Caesar.”

Her fist connected with the slave’s cheek, an old response to ancient wounds reopened. The fair head snapped back. She tumbled to the ends of her chains.

“You lie,” the warrior hissed.

The gladiator slowly hauled herself up, delicately brushed the split cheekbone with the back of her good hand. “Do to him what you did to me. He’ll talk.”

The Conqueror chewed on her words, moved to the stairs. “You’d better be telling the truth, Leopard. Or we’ll be adding lying and treason to your offenses.”

## 12 Misericordiae Exiguae

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### Small Mercies

A scream startled her out of a huddled drowse. From the open hatch above came the high-pitched squeals of a man in agony. She shuddered, tried to cover her ears with her arms. The noises continued for what seemed like hours. Even after they faded away she shivered, stared into the dark corners of the hold, desperate not to think about what tomorrow might bring.

Clumsy footsteps descended the stairs. Niklos, the servant, followed by soldiers. She coiled into a low crouch, wary of what the young man’s arrival could mean.

He stopped at the sight of her, wisely stayed out of range. “M-Mistress sent me to bring you a tunic and change your dressings.” As proof he held up dark linen, clean cloths, ointment. The four guards behind him fanned out around her, swords drawn.

She bristled with each step they took, eyes darting between them, muscles flexing uneasily. Movement on the deck above caught her eye. Long loose hair framed a familiar silhouette, and behind her an imposing armed figure watched her every move. She got the strangest sense she faced some sort of test. Nervous nettles and the rolling of the ship played havoc with lumps of cold porridge in her stomach.

“Stand up,” one of the soldiers snapped, a grizzled veteran she recognized from the stand-off on the deck. By his growl, he remembered her well-placed kick to a comrade’s windpipe, itched



for an excuse to repay in kind. She rose as slowly as she could on a stiff leg, pulled the chains tight against the ungente lurch of the sea.

Standing there on display for the men made her skin prickle. Looks passed between them, hungry wolves sniffing easy prey. One raked her form with a look; she bared her teeth at him. She was chained. She was unarmed. She wasn't helpless.

Especially not with the Conqueror standing over the proceedings. She stood up straighter, knowing the warrior watched her.

A familiar sharp smell reached her nose, green and brown, almost sweet but for the acrid aftertaste. When a hand touched her back she jerked, rattling the chains. Jittery soldiers surged forward, the tips of their swords close enough to chill her skin. Senses on the edge of snapping, she struggled to slow her breathing, calm her heart as the young man quickly applied the foul-smelling salve to the welts. This time her already cool body did not welcome the chill.

Niklos moved to crouch before her. She hardly dared breathe, pulled tighter on the chains to quash any urge to flinch at his touch. For his part he had the grace to look embarrassed, keep his eyes on the task at hand and not the patch of golden curls next to his face. In short order he removed and reapplied the dressings on her achy thigh. The older soldier stepped forward, unlocked the chain at her wrist.

Niklos unwrapped the bandages around her hand, his light and nervous touch soaking through her skin into her already knotted stomach, setting her teeth on edge. The old soldier stepped closer, daring her to try something. If he stood close enough to strike her, he stood close enough to be struck. A quick and unsatisfying path to death to be sure, but worth a moment's fantasy. She held very still, looked up again at the Conqueror and her officer. Faintly she could make out the gleam of white teeth, a dark smile. The warrior saw, knew she chose to do nothing.

The manacle came off her other arm, a welcome chance to rub tender wrists.

Niklos handed her the brown tunic. "I hope this is the right size. It's one of my older ones." She pulled it over her head. It fit well enough through the shoulders, though it hung a little long.

"Hands," the old man grumbled. She held them out, let herself be chained again. She hoped the business finished, but Niklos appeared again, gave her a wineskin, a loaf of bread, and a coarse wool blanket. In a low voice he murmured, "The Conqueror wants you healthy, fed, and well rested for tomorrow." He backed away with a nervous little bow and led the soldiers out of the hold.

Astonished, she stared at the items in her hands, up at the figures at the edge of the hold. The warrior revealed nothing, turned away. The other one stayed a while longer, scrutinizing the gladiator as if trying to read a smudged scroll.

## 13 Condemnatio

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### The Sentence

“Conqueror, it’s time.”

Xena nodded to Bellerophon. He turned to the drum master. “Beat all hands to deck.”

A resounding rhythm roused sailor and soldier alike from their hammocks to assemble under the bright morning sun. When the drum fell silent, the Conqueror stepped forward to the edge of the quarterdeck.

“Bring the assailant,” ordered Bellerophon.

Two soldiers climbed out of the hold with their charge, two more pacing behind, swords drawn.

In spite of the fresh tunic and bandages, she looked a mess. Particularly her face, from inflamed cheekbone to lumpy jawline to swollen lips. She squinted against the bright light at the audience standing at attention. Some color drained from purple lips, a little steadiness fled her steps. They brought her to stand before the Conqueror.

“Bring the assailed.”

From the behind the Conqueror they dragged the sailor, brought him down the steps to stand beside the slave. His face looked much like hers, puffy and colorful. Through swollen eyes he cast her a truly vile look. She glowered back.

The Conqueror squared her shoulders. “Last night the slave you know as the Leopard accosted the sailor Miestes and, in front of witnesses including myself, attempted to strangle him. There is no question as to the defendant’s guilt in this matter.

“There is, however, some question as to the motivation. The slave indicated she overheard Miestes plot bodily harm to the Conqueror.” A mutter rippled through the ranks; she stilled those voices with a hand. “If so, the accused was only doing her duty to protect her mistress.”

“She lies!” Miestes threw himself at the slave, tried to shake off the hands that pulled him back. The Leopard stared back at him, hard as marble.

She fixed him with a look. “Strong words for a man accused of treason.”

“What proof does she offer?” He jutted out his neck, practically frothing as he addressed the assembly. “Look at these! She meant to kill me!”

The Conqueror smirked. “Stupid man. She’s a gladiator. If she wanted you dead, you’d be dead.”

A general murmur fluttered through the crew. She resumed her address. "Just as there is no proof she intended to kill him, there is also no proof that he plotted to kill me. So my judgment is this. I sentence you both to be tied upon the mast until we reach Corinth, at which time your crimes against Greece are forgiven." She arched an eyebrow at the prisoners. "Unless, of course, you wish to confess."

The sailor paled. "Please, Conqueror. I've done nothing wrong."

"Haven't you? Admit your guilt, and you will spend the voyage in the hold awaiting trial. Far more comfortable than a day and night in the elements, I assure you. And far less lethal."

His mouth worked soundlessly. Exasperated, she turned to the slave.

"And you? Do you admit you tried to murder this man?"

The fair woman allowed only the barest shake of her head.

"No? So be it."

She signaled the guards. They nodded and dragged the captives to the main mast.

She caught the slave watching her, something like anger in her bright eyes. No, not anger. More personal. Betrayal.

She stung at that, hid it immediately. She turned her back before the guards dragged them away, didn't watch as they were hoisted into the heavens.

## 14 Dies et Nox

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### A Day and Night

As punishments went, the Leopard had suffered worse. Tied her to the yard arm at the wrists and elbows, her shoulders took most of her weight. They'd tied her feet to the mast, too. Occasionally she could push up for a few minutes, take the pressure off her arms and ribs, get some blood flowing to her fingers. And with the fresh air and unobstructed view of the retreating horizon, her ever-present seasickness had faded to a persistent queasiness.

The worst of it was the incessant grumbling of the sailor tied behind her. He cursed the Conqueror, the gods, the sun, the ship, even the ropes. Mostly he cursed the lying bitch behind him, cursed her parents, her womanhood, and her silence. His voice was like a splinter under a fingernail, infuriating and impossible to remove. Behind closed eyes she plotted a thousand ways to still his tongue, each more gruesome than the last. As morning turned to afternoon, however, his own grousing finally did him in. His voice grew hoarse as it dried up, dropped to a croak, and

then a whisper. Finally he fell silent, only making the occasional moan when someone walked past. A quiet cheer from the depths of her soul for that.

Her disquiet grew in the silence. She replayed the trial in her mind, searching her memory for any trace of her owner's intent. Hadn't the Conqueror believed her? Hadn't the assassin told her what he'd told the Leopard? Her head told her there was no proof. The Conqueror would be expected to mete out harsh punishment for her slave's actions, no matter how justified. In that regard, her punishment could have been much worse. Her owner had done nothing more than any other might. So why did she feel such resentment?

It took her a good portion of the day to come to any answers, and those she found unsettled her. She had begun to think of their interactions as something more than owner and slave. She could swear she saw something in the Conqueror's eyes, some glimmer of respect that transcended nobility and slavery, fame and infamy. Hadn't the Warrior Princess herself risen from humble beginnings? When they sparred, it became a dance only they knew the steps to. The whole world fell away; walls, chains, people peeled back until it was just the two of them and the corral and the starry sky. Those moves, the tactics, the speed...her stomach fluttered at the memory of it, at the thrill of the challenge. And damn her eyes if Xena didn't feel it too.

Apparently not. The Conqueror was just another owner, and she was just another investment to be hoarded or squandered. She'd been foolish and weak to imagine anything more.

Such thoughts circled each other like rivals in the cage of her head. She squeezed them out, only to have them burrow back in when she let her mind wander.

And then there were times when the wind roared like Poseidon's own breath that she thought of the blanket that warded off the chill. And when the sun's heat turned her throat to papyrus, she remembered the weak wine that soothed her through the night. The Conqueror said she took such kindnesses lightly. She was wrong. The Leopard feared them. Each one tore a hole in her heart, a heart she'd spent years hardening until it sat shriveled in her chest, a scrap of old leather. Her owner's unexpected kindnesses made that withered organ swell like a desert flower tasting rain.

She wished she could hate her for it. Some tiny coal in the pit of her stomach did, perhaps. But she'd spent so long learning to survive that hate had become impractical, a waste of precious energy and resources. Hate had to be nursed, coddled, mothered. She was not the mothering type.

Anger was pure, a tool for doing what needed to be done. She needed that strength now. That and pride. She would not let a trifle punishment like this take down the Leopard.

So she hung there, masking her discomfort, willing her face and body into serenity and meeting the gaze of anyone who dared look at her. Especially the Conqueror, who did so many times as the day wore on.

Such displays grew more difficult as night descended. The cool wind seemed to lance through the rough linen straight into her chest. She tensed against it, willed muscles into armor against invisible blows.

Resisting, like hate, took effort. As Selene's bright face rose into the black dome of sky, painting the ship in milky white, her body and her armor faltered, gave way to violent shaking. She shivered so hard it hurt. Coordination of her limbs became tricky when she tried to force herself up, relieve the pressure on her chest.

Late at night when the moon approached her climax, movement on deck dragged her head up. A warm cloak drawn about her shoulders, the Conqueror stepped out of the cabin. Pale eyes surveyed the ship, deliberately coming to rest on her newest possession. The Leopard managed to muster a sunken glare. The warrior looked away, climbed to the quarterdeck to relieve the ship's captain.

She wanted to watch her, to study every movement. And she wanted the woman to feel her stare, to know what she knew. That the Leopard hung there because of her. That the price for helping the Conqueror was suffering. That she chose to submit, chose to endure hunger and humiliation and misery because...because she wanted to prove herself better than a slave. All she needed was the slightest acknowledgement, the barest glimmer of understanding, something to give her hope that her choice had not been in vain.

The Conqueror didn't give her another moment's attention.

Gradually her mind grew fuzzy with cold, her thoughts going missing until she merely stared, transfixed by the ripple of long muscle, the gleam of pale skin, the heat of red lips. She didn't shiver anymore. She thought she should worry, but at least felt relief at the respite.

Sometime later something poked her in the ribs. Again, more forcefully. A third finally forced a groan past cracked lips.

"Drink."

Something warm touched her lips. She poured every ounce of her being into that liquid, forced her heavy head up to swallow whatever her constricted throat would take. It was thin warm broth, nothing more. Didn't matter. Heat flushed through her, pushed back the numbness of sleep, swathed her in mortality.

The soldier moved along the climbing nets to give some to the sailor. He too roused only with harsh treatment, gulped noisily from the wooden cup. Above them the nearly full moon descended toward the distant horizon, promising dawn in a few candlemarks. She looked down, met another pale face shining up at her. What did the Conqueror see hanging from the yard? An animal? A troublemaker? A threat? She had no energy left for rage or bravado. Just one long look. *I am still here.*

The hard look softened just a touch. Then, almost imperceptibly, she nodded.

Eyes fluttered closed, her heart pumping hard.

When she opened them again, the Conqueror was gone.

## 15 Diaeta Revelationis

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### Berth of Revelations

She peeled off her armor in the dark, lay it on the on the floor next to the bed quietly. One arm guard slipped from her fingers, clattered to the floor. She swore at her distraction, snatched it up.

Soft snores still sounded from the down pallet.

She could move the young man, but he'd been sleeping in the tiny space under the stairs for days. No, he could stay. He needed to rest. She needed to think.

The gladiator had gotten to her. She wasn't sure exactly when. Last night in the hold? Yesterday in the crow's nest? At the senator's house? That first fight in the arena? Did it matter? She had a way of commanding the Conqueror's attention with a stance, a sound, a look.

*That* look, just now, as if she'd crucified her own brother. She couldn't get that face out of her head.

She slumped, worn out. She worried for the woman. It was cooler than last night, cool enough to be dangerous. Bigger, healthier men had died under similar circumstances. She feared the broth would not be enough.

She could have, should have had them cut down. Only she'd said they would hang until Corinth, and a leader who changed her mind over a little suffering would be seen as indecisive, weak. She had enough problems with conquered peoples without throwing fuel on the fire.

She took a blanket from the foot of the bed, climbed under the table like the Leopard had, grunted as her head hit wall. Her slave was quite a bit shorter, probably didn't have to bend her knees to fit. And the deck was quite hard, rough on her angular frame. Then again, she could sense the appeal of the cave-like space to the wary Leopard, enclosed on five sides, easily defensible. No doubt the gladiator would have traded her current bed for this one in a heartbeat. She pressed herself back against the wall, closed her eyes.

She dozed, but sleep wouldn't take her. She kept thinking of the gladiator, dying by inches on the mast, until her fierce spirit hardly seemed attached to that failing body, only her eyes glowing like jade brands.

The warrior snapped awake, her senses prickling. It took a moment to focus in the dark, see feet standing by the bed. Not Niklos.

A kick to the knee took the visitor by surprise. While he stumbled her eyes darted to her sword laying by his feet. She reached for it, yanked her arm back empty-handed before his blade almost chopped it off. A kick the groin proved ample distraction while she hooked her legs

around his thigh and jerked him to the ground. She rolled out, snatched up the sword and turned it on him.

Whether she heard or felt the threat, she reacted by instinct, blade knocking away the missile headed for her heart while her hand caught another aimed at her face. A third slipped through, stung the side of her neck.

She spun the sword, reversed her grip. It plunged through flesh and bone, pinning the assassin to the ground.

A wheeze from the bed. Numb fingers found the lantern, struck flint to steel several times before the oil finally caught.

Niklos stared up at her, clutching at the red spilling down his side, struggling to draw breath.

“No,” she murmured, clamping a hand down over the hole. “Marcus!”

Soldiers rushed in the door, swords drawn on the expiring assassin. Captain Marcus pushed his way to the front, his usually calm demeanor cracking. “Demetrius!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Someone get the healer!”

One of the soldiers disappeared. The captain stepped closer, a hand extended as if to help, or console.

“Get away from me!” she shouted, shoving him back against the wall.

“Conqueror...” Awkwardly Marcus reached again, eyes transfixed on her throat.

Reflexively her hand clamped to her neck. A metal dart almost the breadth of an arrow protruded from it. Blood poured liberally from the wound and with it, time. Marcus knew it too, judging by the pallor of his dark complexion.

She swallowed. “Marcus, come here.” She edged away from the berth, made room for him. “Press your hand flat and tight against that hole. Don’t let go unless Demetrius tells you to.” She backed away, hand still pressed to her neck, bumped into the edge of the table, blinking away spots.

Bellerophon shoved his way past the throng, jaw dropping when he laid eyes upon her. “Conqueror! Your neck—”

“Glad you could join us, Captain,” she grumbled.

His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. “What happened?”

She glared at the obvious question. “A visitor at my bedside. Only I wasn’t in it.” She reached over to Niklos, took his cool hand in hers, tried to warm it, nodded encouragement. The young man wheezed, too petrified to look at her.

Marcus shook his head, pressed harder on the hole in his side. “Your gladiator was right. She just accused the wrong man.”

The Conqueror looked at the impaled corpse, hooked a toe under the sleeve of the assassin’s tunic. SPQR.

“Bellerophon, round up all the sailors from the Roman ship and lock them in the hold, including that man on the mast. As for the Leopard...bring her to me.”

The captain’s eyes went wide. “Conqueror? She could be working with them. She might have deliberately identified the wrong man—”

“Enough!” Her head was beginning to do strange things, and his squawking was not helping her temper. “Bring her to me now.”

Bellerophon couldn’t quite mask the argument in his eyes, but he knew better than to voice it. He saluted, turned away.

“And Captain? I’m not very impressed with the security on this ship. Take care of it, starting with stationing guards at my door.”

She said nothing more about the attempt on her life, but her eyes flashed silent threat. He caught her meaning and swallowed. “By your will.”

Her awareness began to run together, to overflow so that she missed some things, fixated on others. The healer pushed past the crowd of soldiers in the door, headed straight for her. She tried to push him over to Niklos, but he wouldn’t have it. “He can wait, Conqueror. You can’t.” Boots clattered on the deck overhead, the commotion loud enough to alert even the densest crewman to the fact that something had happened. The body disappeared sometime during the rush. “I have to take this out,” intoned the healer, packing more cloths against the flooding wound.

“No. Not yet.”

“Now, before you have no more blood left in you to lose.”

“No,” she barked. “Just a few more minutes.”

He didn’t understand why, but he went about laying out bandages and needle and thread. Minutes passed, until he edged forward, voice dropped to a desperate whisper. “Please, Conqueror. There’s not much time.”



Edges of her vision going dark, she searched the faces swarming around the cabin, not seeing one in particular. Reluctantly she gave in, leaned against a wall and steeled herself.

“This might—”

“Just do it,” she snarled.

He pulled. A fine spurt of blood painted his face. She almost laughed, but his hand pressed into her neck so hard she had to strain to breathe. She let her eyes slide shut, hid the blindness creeping across her vision, the lightheadedness that threatened to topple her.

A hand clasped hers, small, calloused, icy. She squeezed back, an anchor in the darkness. “She stays with me,” she announced to whomever happened to hear. Then she let go.

## III Orae Corinthiae

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Corinthian Shores

### 16 Pompa

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Procession

A bang woke the Leopard, sent her heart into wild pounding. Eyes darted about the dim lamp-lit cabin, sifted through the sounds that filtered in. Beyond the wooden walls came shouts, movement, activity. Muscles tensed, ready to move.

Moments passed. No threat burst in the door. The commotion drifted away and heaviness seeped back into her bones, drew her down into the warmth of the pallet.

The warmth of another body. She stiffened, staring at the slack face, the wild dark hair, raking her memories for how and when she ended up in the Conqueror's bed. Then again, most of last night was hazy. Moments of clarity clung to her rather than an actual sequence of events. The deck rushing up to meet her. The light and pandemonium of the tiny cabin. Seeing the Conqueror, eyes closed, skin pale as milk, chest bathed in crimson. Standing in a crowd so quiet it seemed to be holding its breath, knowing the mythical Warrior Princess might not survive the night. Watching long fingers twitch with each ungentle stitch. Moving forward to kneel beside her, frozen hands covering hers, hiding the weakness. Her words, *She stays with me*, before sagging against the wall. A sea of hard faces upon the Destroyer of Nations, be they supporters, admirers, critics, or enemies.

That fact alone gave her fortitude enough to stay awake, cast suspicious looks at anyone—even officers—who approached while the healer worked. Luckily no one tried to lay a hand on either of them. There was probably little she could do to protect the Conqueror, weak as she was, but no one called her bluff. Once the healer moved to treat the young servant she slumped, rested

her head against the warrior's leg, succumbed to violent shivering. Someone draped a blanket around her shoulders, put a bowl of broth in her hand, left her to nurse it. Sleep pulled on her. She feared she might not stay awake, but anytime someone stepped near she came to life, shifted between them and the unconscious woman, baring teeth and barring access.

Captain Marcus ordered the gawkers out. The healer finished bandaging Niklos's chest, moved him to rest under the table. Bloody sheets made way for fresh ones; delicately they stripped the ruined shift and put the Conqueror to bed. The captain's eyes raked the slave head to toe before reluctantly pulling the door shut behind him.

She exhaled, gingerly settled her stiff body on the edge of the berth at her owner's feet, leaned back against the wall to shake uncontrollably. The blanket was useless, seemed to hold the heat out more than in. Cold had taken root in her bones; she wondered if she would ever feel warm again.

That was the last she remembered until now. She and her wool blanket draped over the Conqueror like a shield, arm and shoulder and hip and leg stretched across the sleeping form, her cheek resting on one broad shoulder. Only the finest silk sheet separated skin from skin. She lay very still, her mind racing. Had the healer undressed her, moved her in her sleep? She hated to think she could be so far gone not to remember such a thing. Or had she shifted on her own, seeking warmth in sleep she could not find awake? Heat fairly radiated off the woman like sunlight, and she almost felt normal again. If feeling drained, sore from head to foot, and hungry as a beast in the games constituted normal. The fact that she was getting used to such a state did not reassure her about what life would be like under the Conqueror.

She should move. The Conqueror would not tolerate an uninvited slave in her bed, lying so close, touching her so familiarly. Nor would her officers likely be pleased. Then again, if the healer put her there, she should stay.

With the woman who ordered her crucified on the mast.

She pressed herself up, immediately sank down again, arms trembling, head full of wool. She'd be a fool not to stay, sleep, allow her body to rest. Let the Conqueror punish her later for doing what she had to do. Her body needed water, food, and rest, in whatever order she could accommodate.

Even with her head resting on the soft muscular arm, it took effort to relax. She stared resolutely at the berth wall, waiting for sleep to reclaim her, but the constant activity on the deck above and the pulse beneath her cheek kept her on edge, wouldn't let her drift off. Her gaze wandered from the wall to the body before her, to the jump of a slow heartbeat under translucent skin. Eventually her eyes fixed on the gentle rise and fall of the lean woman's chest. No, lean was too generous a word. Ribs rippled under the sheet, hip bones thrust like mountain peaks under the rough blanket. Her arm wrapped easily around the woman's middle with room to spare. The hollow cheeks, the pronounced collarbones...how had she not noticed sooner? The warrior she'd met in the practice yard that night stood so tall and powerful. A goddess,

invincible, reduced to mere woman, thin and wounded and very mortal. Fingers itched to touch a puckered scar over her right breast, wonder at its hidden story—

The door opened and she tumbled from the bed, bouncing gracelessly off the floor. She stood quickly, jerked the blanket tight around her, trying to look intimidating in spite of her heat-filled face.

The healer held up his hands, offered a wry smile. “Peace, girl. I merely wish to check on my patients.”

She backed out of his way, allowed sure hands to examine the stitches. The servant remained dead to the world, but the warrior turned her head at the prodding, finally opening wan eyes.

“Niklos?”

“He breathes.”

Some tension fell from her brow. She closed her eyes. “We’ve docked.”

Indeed, the motion of the floor and walls was almost unnoticeable after three days at sea.

“Captain Bellerophon sent me to wake you and prepare for the procession into Corinth.”

“Did he?” By her tone, the slave guessed giving the Conqueror orders could be a poor career choice. “Some fresh air would be welcome.” She hauled herself upright, immediately tilted. Two pairs of hands caught her. “Maybe not.”

They lay her back down, the healer lifting the eyelid to look into each eye. Reassured, he nodded, turned to the slave. “Now let’s have a look at you.”

The Leopard immediately stepped away, her guard up, heel to the wall.

“Come, girl. You were three sheets to dead last night. I need to make sure you’re alright.”

She refused, eyes flashing threat, kept him at bay with a stiff arm.

“Let him look at you,” her owner said quietly, velvet over steel. The Leopard glared at her defiantly. The warrior’s voice softened. “He has my permission, if he has yours.”

Her nostrils flared. Permission? This was her choice? Then she chose no.

The moment she made up her mind, the stubborn streak burned out, left a survivor’s practicality. The blanket fell to the floor.

She wondered at her own disarmament, at the pale eyes watching her from the bed, welcome distraction from the gnarled fingers poking tender wounds.

He clucked his tongue, turning the unwrapped wrist in his palm. The back of her hand felt puffy and tender, raw edges of skin gone white. “Conqueror, I recommend your herbalist look at this hand as soon as possible. Infection would surely do her great harm in her weakened state.”

The Leopard bristled, would show him weakened—

“I’ll see to it. Anything else?”

“The leg is healing nicely. I could examine her more thoroughly,” his voice trailing off as he glanced up into fierce eyes, “but I don’t think that would be wise.”

The warrior offered a tight-lipped grin. “You know how wild things are, Demetrius. Too skittish to know what’s good for them.”

He nodded, satisfied. “I’ll have your trunks sent up from the hold. Captain Bellerophon said he will be by shortly to escort you to the palace. By your will, Conqueror.”

The door latched behind him. Cold reality settled on the slave. A whole different world lay beyond that door, with new rules to be learned the hard way. Rome had been difficult enough. She felt more in command of herself and her fate this time, but already found herself squarely in the path of trouble more times than she could count on one hand. Danger seemed to dance around the Conqueror like some loving courtier, a deadly partner to cut in on.

“Hey.” So faint was her whisper, so uncharacteristic of the Conqueror, that she caught herself staring at a stranger. Those blue eyes stared back, flickered over her bare form. It was just a glance, but the gladiator flushed hot, gathered the blanket around her once more. One hand beckoned; uncertainly the gladiator approached.

“I know you’re angry with me. You tried to warn me. I won’t doubt your honesty again. But others will, and it won’t be the last time you’ll have to suffer to prove yourself. Can you live with that? You don’t have to, you know. I could put you somewhere safer. The kitchens, perhaps?”

The Conqueror offered a twisted little smile, and immediately the gladiator knew why. Ordinary slaves did not sleep in the Conqueror’s cabin, dine on the Conqueror’s food, fight for the Conqueror’s pleasure, receive the Conqueror’s tender care. The Leopard was no ordinary slave, had never been. She’d fought for the pleasure of men of consequence, dined with heads of state, met some of the most famous men and women of the known world. The Leopard was too proud to take up an existence scrubbing floors and dishes. Not after the freedom and power of the arena. Not after the past few days with the Conqueror.

She saw it in the Conqueror’s eyes, the certainty that no one would turn down the life she offered. Had she given Niklos the same choice? Niklos, who rasped with each shallow breath, his future uncertain? How many servants had said yes before Niklos? How many officers before Marcus and Bellerophon? How many slaves before this moment? Where were they now, those who chose this intoxicating woman’s bloody path just to bask—and burn—in her sunlight?

Dead and gone. Perhaps that would be her fate as well. But the Leopard would not hide from it. Until then she would bide her time, play the good servant, tolerate the Conqueror's abuses, wait for the chance to escape. And if the Conqueror proved to be an exceptionally cruel owner...well, accidents could happen to anyone. They'd certainly happened before.

Throat dry, she nodded.

"Good. Your first duties then. While Niklos is recovering, I need a body slave."

The slave faltered, heart hammering in her chest.

The woman smirked. "It's not what you think. Just attend to my physical needs. Food, water, clothing. I'll tell you what I need."

Some things came naturally, like helping the weakened woman sit up, bringing her water, taking her to relieve herself. Other things proved more unsettling. Like sponging sweat from long lean arms and legs, back and breasts. In spite of the set of her jaw, she felt her ears grow hot, averted her eyes, hurried her movements. Then embarrassed at such puerile behavior, she forced herself to slow down, allowed herself to look at the thin physique, a blend of ropey warrior muscle and spare feminine curve. Her owner cleared her throat; she found herself still, her task forgotten. And she flushed again, set to scrubbing harder than necessary, unable to look her owner in the eye.

The trunks arrived. The Conqueror had her pull out a wine-colored silk dress with a high collar that clung to her form nicely. It also did a decent job of concealing the bandage at her throat. She put the slave to work brushing out the tangled ebony hair. After only a few minutes the Conqueror cocked her head, took the brush from her. "Your tunic and armor should be in the other trunk. Put them on. Quickly."

The gladiator pulled out the dirty tunic, found her armor wrapped in sackcloth underneath. She looked up at the warrior questioningly.

The woman fixed her with a serious gaze as she brushed pitilessly at the tangles. "You are not some faceless slave. You are the Leopard, one of Rome's prized gladiators. And my latest conquest. You better look the part. Hurry. Bellerophon is coming."

She belted the *cingulum* over her soiled tunic, hefted the leather cuirass over her head, found the same hands helping to buckle it on that last took it off. She was left to lace up the boots herself as a knock announced the visitor. The Conqueror took a seat on the edge of the berth, composing herself.

"Come in," she drawled.

With quick glances Captain Bellerophon took in his commanding officer and her armored slave. His face remained carefully neutral. "Conqueror, the men are assembled for the procession. We can leave as soon as you are ready."

“Very good. Have a detail deliver Niklos to a cot in my chambers. And have this slave shackled to my sedan with the sturdiest chains we have.”

“By your will.” Bellerophon stepped aside, gesturing for the gladiator lead the way.

The Conqueror’s words rang in her head. *You better look the part.* She lifted her chin, steadied herself, stepped from the Conqueror’s presence onto the deck.

Like stepping from summer into winter. The captain snapped his fingers, summoning four soldiers. “Make sure the Conqueror’s newest pet doesn’t move a muscle.” He flashed a handsome smile that rose no further than his cheeks, left her in their watchful care.

One part of her attention on her hostile guard, she dedicated the rest to the port of Corinth. Harsh sun beat down from a cloudless sky. Crewmen and soldiers shouted and bustled, unloading the holds and assembling into columns on the docks. They numbered in the hundreds, far too many to have come off the ship. A welcoming troop from the local barracks, then. They stood in stark contrast to Roman legionnaires, their lines undisciplined, their armor unified in black leather and steel and little else. Only a dozen or so wore the ornate metal breastplates and helmets she’d grown accustomed to on deck. Those in matching uniforms likely formed a royal guard of sorts, like Bellerophon and his men, their steel cuirasses decorated with a clawed serpentine monster, bright blue matching tassels waving in the breeze where they stood around a covered sedan.

The Conqueror’s displeasure at one of her men plotting against her became clearer, if every soldier on the ship belonged to an elite troop hand-picked to guard her life.

Abruptly hands clamped down on her arms, grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked her head back. For a moment she stared down the dark shaft of the well, felt hot breath and hands—

—*Keep still, whore*—

and instinctively kicked back, drove the heel of her boot into a knee, jerked one arm free, elbowed up into the jaw with the other. A fist out of nowhere snapped her head around. Blindly she spun with it, smashed the heel of her palm across a nose. Bellerophon’s. Gods have mercy. Her extraordinary existence as the Conqueror’s slave would end in execution.

She jumped over the captain as he fell, keeping balled fists between her and the guards. She could feel others moving in behind her, turned her body to give them a shoulder rather than her back.

Bellerophon regained his footing, iron collar in hand, blue eyes glaring at her from a face that looked south and a nose that pointed west. Blood flowed down his lips, sprayed in heavy drops when he spoke. “Kill the bitch.”

Swords sang from their scabbards, four ahead, more behind. Her eyes darted around for a weapon, a shield, anything to put between her and them. Nothing. Just shrinking space to maneuver and nowhere to go but up the ropes or over the side.

A throaty laugh froze them in their tracks. The Conqueror crossed the deck, her hair pinned up, her face framed by the feathered gold crown of a great predatory bird, like some strange Egyptian goddess made flesh on earth.

A sneer played across her mouth when she caught sight of Bellerophon. “Trouble following my simplest orders, Captain? I said I want this slave shackled. Now.”

“But, Conqueror, she resisted—”

She snatched the chains from his hands, latched onto his flattened beak and pulled. He yelped, held the reset nose with shaking hands as she calmly crossed the deck.

A horrible blood-red smile made the gladiator shiver. Exhibiting a calm she didn’t feel, she dropped her arms and forced her chin up to meet the ice blue gaze, held still while the Conqueror latched the thick iron collar firmly in place. The wrist cuffs followed, trussed her hands under her chin on a very short leash. The Conqueror gave the heavy chain an experimental tug, jerked her subject down to her knees. The gladiator gritted her teeth.

“Bellerophon, the Leopard is a kitten! Must I do everything myself?” She held out a hand, wagged fingers impatiently until the captain produced the key. With a yank she forced the slave to her feet, led her down the gangplank at a stroll. Her leisurely gait masked unsteadiness, completely hid the fact that less than an hour ago she could barely stand. The gladiator didn’t know whether to be impressed or disturbed.

At the bottom of the gangway the warrior swayed, caught herself before anyone, slave included, could move to help her. She laughed it off. “Time to trade in those sea legs for my old ones.” The men nearby laughed too, if nervously. The slave let out a held breath.

Captain Marcus offered her a hand into the sedan. She settled herself, the chain draping lazily over her shoulder. At Marcus’ signal, eight men lifted the chair, and drums set the column in motion up a wide road into the walled city.

[Continued in Part 2](#)

**Spyrel's Scrolls**  
[Index Page](#)

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# Pretium Silenti

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The Price of Silence

By Spyrel

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**Disclaimer:** [See Part 1](#)

**Feedback:** Almost forgot. This is my first fic; if you like it, or even if you read it, please send your comments to [spyrel@yahoo.com](mailto:spyrel@yahoo.com).

**FYI:** To read this story in book formatting, visit [Spyrel's Descent](#).

## 17 Salutatio Corinthia

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A Corinthian Welcome

Corinth could not compare to Rome in color, size, or stature. Where Rome was covered in rich paints and bold fabrics and gold leaf, Corinth's drab tones smacked more of a prison. Although a sizeable city, Corinth could not measure up to the miles and miles of roads that crossed the seven great hills of Rome. Even the people seemed smaller somehow, hunched and beaten down, if not broken. Rome was the heart of the Roman Empire. Corinth was the head of Greece, all strategy and no patience for anything else. Caesar captured Rome; they shared little in common, like spouses in a forced marriage. The Conqueror consumed Corinth. The Conqueror *was* Corinth.

Spontaneous cheers rose up from the citizenry as the procession passed. "Hail the Conqueror!" "Ares grant us victory!" "The Destroyer has returned!" The slave stared at faces as

they passed, saw fear, hatred, euphoria, and hysteria in their eyes. At the Conqueror. At the soldiers. At her.

Something hard bounced off her armor. "Death to the enemies of Greece!" Another stone sailed in; she ducked it, only to be struck by another on the ear. "Death to the Romans!" Rocks and vegetables and coins flew in, stinging legs, arms, face. She resisted the urge to throw back, settled for her best snarl.

Something caught her in the back of the head, dropped her to her knees. Hands strained against the irons to reach back, felt warm wetness in her hair before the chain snapped tight, wrenched her onto her elbows, dragged her along. She clambered up, lurched ahead blindly, squinting down a dark tunnel until she could get her bearings. Scraped knees and elbows proved especially sensitive targets for the mob's missiles. She hunched her shoulders against the barrage, her hands shielding her face what little the chains would allow.

She decided she didn't care much for the hospitality of Corinth.

The procession reached a large town square in front of the gates of a massive fortress. The sedan-bearers mounted steps to the side of the main gates, lowering the chair onto a platform that overlooked the common area. Reluctantly the gladiator mounted the steps behind her owner, did her best to stand very still and become invisible.

The Conqueror rose. When the assembly finally quieted down, the absoluteness of it deafened.

"Our journey to Rome is a great victory for Greece and her people. Caesar welcomes peace with mighty Corinth. He wishes to establish trade routes over land and sea which will bring good fortune and prosperity to all the lands under Greece's rule. Furthermore, Caesar has agreed to withdraw his troops from Illyria, opening trade and expansion all the way to the northern sea!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd, harsh and forced.

Xena waited until the noise calmed. "And I have claimed another prize for Greece. Caesar issued a challenge, one of Rome's favorite gladiators, the Leopard, against your Conqueror. Now Rome's prize is mine."

The chain jerked and twisted; caught off guard, she fell to scraped knees and elbows, the roar of approval hardly penetrating her senses. A boot pressed her cheek to the platform. Not hard, but enough to make a point.

"Crucify her!" Others in the crowd took up the cry. Alarmed, the slave looked up at her owner, saw that terrifying grin again.

"Crucify her? Crucifying is too good for this whore of Rome. She will live out the rest of her days under my heel, her skills serving Greece as I see fit. Just as Rome herself will someday."

More strident cheers. Only after many long seconds did the pressure let up; she struggled to her feet, glowered uneasily at the Conqueror's back. If the crowd booed her before, they despised her now. Romans had hated the Leopard too, but in the arena, the crowd was little more than a squirming jeering mass of flesh. Faceless. Removed. Insignificant. Not like this, just out of reach of a frenzied mob howling for her blood.

Relief flooded through her when the bearers lifted the sedan to leave, turned sour at the narrow path the soldiers cleared through the throng. People pressed much closer this time, close enough to spit at her, swipe at her with fists and claws. She avoided some only to be snared by others, barely managed to keep her feet as fingers tugged on her armor, ripped her tunic, dug into her flesh. She kicked at one that wouldn't let go of her shoulder guard, found her leg caught and pulled. She elbowed that one away, but others surged in his place, hands grabbing, knotting in her hair, pummeling her head. Already lightheaded, she stumbled and fell, kicked wildly as they grabbed her legs and hauled her off the ground, pulling against the collar. Frantically she thrashed, clutching at the chain, desperate to loosen the metal noose around her neck. A rushing filled her ears as more and more hands latched on to elbows and feet, intent on tearing her limb from limb.

The hands let go, heads cracking as one of the royal guard stepped in, beat them off with the pommel of his sword. Strong arms hauled her to her feet, the soldier shielding her from the hateful crowd until they entered the palace.

When they were safe inside the gate and beyond sight of the horde, trembling knees gave out and she vomited water and rancid broth across the paving stones. Again, more of the same and viscous bile. And again and again, reflexive heaves until she thought her intestines would come up through her nose. Strong gentle hands supported her when her elbows gave, let her work solely on cleansing her system of fear.

## 18 Delicium Novicium Victriciis

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### The Conqueror's New Pet

Though she stared at the palace guard intently, the Conqueror barely heard a word he said, all attention focused on the retching slave silhouetted in the dim corridor. She'd heard the jeers of the crowd, felt the tugging on the chain, knew they went for her. As she trained her eyes on the poor man before her, she wondered how close they came, how badly they'd hurt her—

“—are waiting to see the Conqueror in the great hall.”

“What? No. Absolutely not. Tell them to come back tomorrow.”

“Yes, Conqueror, I understand. But they say the flood washed away their homes, devastated their food stores. The survivors are starving and need provisions immediately. If wagons left now, the food would arrive in two days.”

“How much food?”

He blinked. “I’m not sure, Conqueror.”

She frowned, watched a scarred soldier approach. Though not a large man, he carried in his arms the limp gladiator, her pale face buried in his shoulder. An eyebrow floated into her hairline. “Put her in my room. And fetch my herbalist. And have the kitchen send up some food.”

He nodded. She watched him until he was out of sight, reluctantly turned back to the waiting guard. “Let’s go. This better be quick.”

It was not. The flooded village got several wagons of provisions in exchange for sending healthy young men to serve in the army. Surely they expected no less for her benevolence. But a messenger from Persia intercepted her, requesting more troops to hold back the Horde, followed by a messenger from Egypt announcing its wish to renegotiate the terms of their ‘alliance.’ To both she said the same thing. *Come back tomorrow, or you will not like my response.*

As she left the great hall, Bellerophon fell in step behind her. “Cleopatra is no fool. She wouldn’t risk your wrath without leverage.” His voice hummed around the bloated nose.

Xena shook her head, too worn out to care. “See what you can find out.”

Bellerophon bowed, left her side.

She navigated the corridors by rote, her legs heavy. The scar-faced guard waited for her outside the heavy plain door, saluted as she approached. “Conqueror, your slave and servant are inside. The herbalist is tending to them, and food is waiting for you.”

She acknowledged, already pushing past him. A thought struck her. “Did they hurt her?”

“Conqueror?”

“Those animals in the crowd. Did any lay a hand on her?”

“Plenty, I’d say. They’re stirred up about your trip, would love to give any Roman what’s coming to them. But I don’t think she’s hurt, really. Mostly shook up.”

She nodded absently, reliving another mob, a gauntlet of sneering faces. The woman who would become Conqueror learned a pivotal if unpleasant lesson that day: mercy doesn’t impress an army. It had taken a long time to put that experience behind her. One rarely survives a mob unscathed. “Well...thank you.” She cringed, slapped by words and sentiment very unlike the Conqueror, cleared her throat to cover it. “Joxer, isn’t it?”

He responded with a sober jerk of the chin. "You saved my life at Athens."

She didn't remember that. She did remember a far more recent skirmish, cleaving her way through a pack of Roman dogs trying to take over her ship. Running one man through, her blade binding in his spine. Several swords and spears coming at her, forcing her to jump back or be skewered. His lunge into attacks meant for her, driving them back while she rearmed herself. Neither of them spoke of it, then or now.

She gave his armor a once-over. "How long have you been a Dragon?"

The nasty scar from forehead to jawline seemed to render his face incapable of cracking a smile. "Almost a year, Conqueror."

He didn't act green, didn't try to curry her to favor. He'd served at Athens, must have been regular army for some time. "Well, you impressed me today. The Leopard doesn't let just anyone touch her."

His face twitched at the rare compliment. "Thank you, Conqueror."

She dismissed him, entered her chambers. A small entryway lay just beyond the main door, a lead-in to more double doors and the enormous suite beyond. The previous rulers of Corinth apparently needed a lot of room to engage in their private affairs. The Destroyer of Nations did not, filled the space inadequately. A gigantic bed dominated the center of the main chamber, decorated in exquisite pillows, blankets, and sheets from Egypt, India, Chin, and Japa. Beyond the bed a small fire danced in the hearth. On one side a desk and chair faced a narrow window. On the other side clothes occupied one antechamber; another housed a sumptuous bath. The main chamber remained generally empty save for a few personal items collected in her conquests. Sounds echoed unpleasantly around the room, only slightly muted by fine oriental rugs and rare animal pelts covering the floor.

In stark contrast to the void of the bed chamber, the entry alcove bustled with activity. On a hastily arranged cot lay her personal servant, his breathing thin and strained as an old man removed gold and silver and bronze needles from his skin. Niklos' pinched brown eyes searched for her, too terrified to move. Pained, she hung back in the corner of the entry, out of the way while the herbalist finished.

He put his medicines away, spoke to her alone in the language of Chin. "The blade has disrupted his chi; his chest does not expand properly. He may not recover, but...his energies seem favorable. I can give him a drink to ease the pain and help him sleep. He needs strict bed rest, no duties."

She nodded, allowed herself the indulgence of squeezing Niklos' hand. She smoothed his bangs, forced herself to smile at the uncomprehending young man as if everything were fine.

The shriveled herbalist turned on her, said in thickly-accented Greek, "Now examine you."

She impatiently shrugged off his hand. "I'm fine—"

"You always argue. Let old man do what you spare his life to do." He took his bag of herbs and tinctures to the bed, sat down and waited for her to join him.

She worked at the buttons of the oriental gown. "Stop fussing, you quack. I'm fine. See? Demetrius did an excellent job patching me up."

He chuckled humorlessly. "Demetrius take no credit for this. This remarkable healing and stubbornness." He removed the dressing, cursed the healer's parentage. "Barbarians. Always you cut each other open, call it medicine."

He prepared a poultice and a tea while she removed the dress and headpiece, retrieved a soft worn robe. Neither pretty nor new, it comforted her like an old blanket or favorite pair of boots.

She stepped out of the antechamber, spotted the fair figure curled on her side below the window. "What about her?"

"Her? She would not—"

"—let you touch her," she finished, hardly surprised. She drank his bitter potion, pressed the hot poultice to her neck as she crossed to stand before the Leopard. In the darker edges of the chamber a thin ray of sunlight weakly illuminated her face, drew out numerous cuts and scrapes, the waxy complexion, the dull sage eyes, the heavy iron collar and manacles. At her approach the slave pressed herself up to her knees, head down.

This disturbed her more than any gushing wound. She crouched down before the woman, lifted her face. "You alright?"

Woodenly the gladiator nodded. Some shadow lingered in her eyes though, some wound unseen. The Conqueror removed the manacles from her neck and wrists, unwrapped her hand and held it up in the sunlight for the herbalist's inspection.

His pruned face squinted, sighed at the half-healed mess, the swelling, the pink tendrils creeping up her wrist. "She will have fever tomorrow. Give her yellow flower medicine, will realign her chi." He took her arm in his skeletal hands, pressed sharp fingers deep into her forearm and shoulder. She gasped, glared at him in an almost comical look of surprise if not for the alarm growing in her eyes. Xena concealed a tiny smile, remembering that shock of discomfort wrapped in a promise of pain. The wild thing tried to pull away; the Conqueror held her arm still with firm hands. Reflexively the Leopard's other hand formed a fist; the warrior caught it before it connected with the old man's face, whispered, "Breathe."

They stayed like that, a tangled knot of arms and hands, the Leopard trembling, drawing ragged breaths.

His grip relaxed. She sagged, panting, cradled the arm to her as if broken.

“Will heal faster. She need food, water. When last time you feed her?”

“I’ll take care of it.” She flexed the gladiator’s arm and shoulder, not unlike when she relocated it. Gods, their first meeting face to face, a lifetime of excitement ago. Xena smiled. The Leopard would certainly make for stimulating company.

The old man pressed a steaming cup into the slave’s hand. “Drink it,” the Conqueror commanded, before the slave could even make a gesture of refusal. “It tastes like dung, trust me, but it will keep you from losing the hand.”

She eyed the Conqueror, the herbalist dubiously. The contents of the cup went down in one gulp; the grimace took longer to fade.

The warrior grinned. “Welcome to my life.”

A knock at the door. “Come,” she called out.

A portly man bustled in, bowed deeply. “Conqueror. Is everything to your liking?”

She stood, moved to intercept him. “I haven’t tried the food yet.”

“And you sent for the herbalist—” He gasped. “Niklos! My dulcet dove, what have those Roman pigs done to you?”

“He’s recovering, Vidalis. Let him rest. How is the palace?”

He resisted the urge to go to the young man, clasped his manicured fingers. “Fine, Mistress. No troubles to report.” He spied the gown and crown on the floor near the antechamber and snatched them up, flitted around the chamber, tidying her mess. “Did your wardrobe have the desired effect, Conqueror?”

“Caesar noticed if that’s what you mean. So did most of the male inhabitants of Rome.”

“Stellar. I shall have all your dresses cleaned—oh my.”

In his sweep around the room he stumbled upon her in the patch of sunlight. Eyes stalked him the moment he entered until he came too close and she crouched, ready.

“Vidalis, this is my newest slave...” What name had she given? Gabrielle? Immediately she discarded it. Far too soft and banal for the gladiator poised to punch her headservant’s teeth in. “Parda, the Leopard of Rome.”

He thoroughly inspected her from head to toe, his narrowed gaze speaking volumes. “Goodness, Mistress. Did you buy her or defeat her?”

“Both. I’ll need another cot sent up.”

“Really? There is plenty of room in the slave’s quarters for one more uncouth—” He glanced at the Conqueror’s hard face. “Of course, this space is far too empty. Another cot would certainly liven up the place.”

She took his elbow and led him away, dropping her voice. “She’ll need some plain tunics, something in the Roman style to make her feel at home. I trust your judgment, of course.”

The man pursed his lips, sizing her up. “I’ll have to get that armor off, get some measurements.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Not gonna happen. You’ll just have to give it your best guess and we’ll go from there.”

He sighed. “Can I do anything else for you, Mistress?”

“She can attend to my needs while Niklos recovers. What you do already is plenty.”

He beamed and bowed dramatically, backing out of the room and closing the doors behind him.

The herbalist rolled his eyes, fed more of his crushed leaves to Niklos.

“You too, old man.”

He slipped back into the melodic tongue of Chin. “As you wish. These are for his pain. They work best on an empty stomach. He can eat them now, but he should take some again in the afternoon, and again when it is dark.” He did not take long to gather his medicines and leave.

Finally she stood alone in her chambers, safe from the outside world. The quiet wrapped around her like a blanket. She closed her eyes, released the iron grip she held on her spine.

The gladiator caught her arm before she realized she’d tilted, guided her to the bed. She lay there, eyes closed, listening to clanking pottery and silver until a hand on her shoulder encouraged her to sit up. The gladiator held out a goblet of wine, willed her to drink it.

“You first. Part of your new duties.”

The woman frowned, confused. The Conqueror offered a wan smile. “It’s probably fine. No one’s tried to poison me in months.”

Doubts flitted across the slave’s features. Steeling herself, she closed her eyes, took one slow sip. A long moment passed, as if she waited for a snake to bite her on the tongue. She forced herself to swallow, waited again for her body to signal distress. Nothing. Her shoulders relaxed. Clear eyes offered the cup again.



The warrior took it, downed it in one gulp, gestured to the plate of food between them. One by one her new slave sampled the bread, cheeses, fruits and vegetables, lamb and duck. She had the look of one going to an execution, not a proper death for a gladiator. It left a sour taste in the Conqueror's mouth.

They ate quietly, neither feeling much enthusiasm for the meal. Xena found herself staring at the young face. Eight, maybe ten winters separated them, though the Conqueror couldn't be sure. In a fight, in pain, in anger, in trouble, her face formed a mask as ageless and impenetrable as stone.

She knew that mask. She acquired hers when the warlord Cortese invaded her village so many years ago, molded it into form over her brother's dead body, made it a part of her daily life after her mother disowned her. But she owed the final polish to an arrogant Roman noble named Caesar who promised her love and power. The same man who betrayed her, left her and her crew crucified on a beach as a lesson to those who might mistake him for a pawn and not a player.

The Leopard's mask was a cold, distant thing. But sometimes, like now, it slipped. Hard years fell away from her, left a softness, a hollow ache that made the Conqueror uncomfortable. She looked away, pretended not to see. "I need a bath. Come."

She led the slave to the side chamber, relieved to find the tub filled in anticipation of her return. She dropped the old robe as she stepped in, pinning her hair up and settling into water up to her collarbones with a sigh. She closed her eyes and soaked for a few minutes, letting the journey's filth dissolve in the heat. Could have fallen asleep in an instant if not for the stranger watching her. She sighed and took up a sponge, hadn't the energy to scrub but at least wiped almost every inch of skin.

Her back prickled. She turned to see hooded eyes staring at the water like a beggar at a feast. A hand gestured for her to come closer, handed her the sponge. "Wash my back."

For the second time that day, the slave bathed her mistress. The first bath was hesitant, embarrassed. This time her movements were coarse and hurried.

She lay a hand on the sponge, held it still. "Gentle. Like this." She moved the slave's hand in lazy circles on her shoulder, the pressure firm but not rough. Gradually carefulness crept into the touch, calloused hands relearning how to wash rather than scour, soothe rather than hurt.

Back, arms, and legs clean, she rested her head back against the edge of the tub as the sponge gently scrubbed her chest, her stomach, her breasts. Pleasant sensations, if not particularly erotic. She felt the sponge dip lower and hesitate, opened her eyes. The slave stared hard below the surface of the water, moisture beading on her brow. Without a word she pried the sponge from frozen fingers.

"I'm done. Get those off."

The Conqueror stepped out of the bath, towed herself dry and drew the robe over her shoulders, watched the gladiator surreptitiously. Armor and boots came off slowly but without a fight. The Conqueror smiled, thinking of that night in the cabin as they set sail from Rome. What a difference three days made.

“The tunic, too. All of it.”

That brought a spark of will back.

She sighed. “For the bath.”

Those pale green eyes held hers as she obeyed. They spoke of trust, if guarded. And they did a fair job of keeping her eyes from wandering elsewhere. The Conqueror forced herself to step back, taking in the sight before her.

Even standing tense and ready, she looked wrecked. Beneath the caked sweat and leopard spots and dirt and blood and scars, bumps and bruises purpled nicely on her face and neck and torso, complimented the outright flaying of her hand, the puckered stitches of her arm and leg. While the injuries looked bad, she dismissed them as known concerns, noted instead the freshly skinned knees and elbows, shallow fingernail scratches, blood matted in the thick shock of white-gold hair.

She eyed the scratches and cuts, tender tokens of affection from her subjects, and felt the barest twinge of guilt. She’d intended to use the Leopard as a symbol, an effigy of Rome to rile the masses. She hadn’t meant for the mob to get so close. Not that she would ever admit events hadn’t gone exactly as planned. She’d become the Conqueror by being all-knowing, being able to predict her enemies’ every move. Reputation as much as anything kept the circling jackals at bay.

Fingers brushed the long scratches on the muscular bicep as if tracking sign in the woods, trying to read the actions behind them, glean some information about the perpetrator. Dark fantasies of finding the assailant and returning the injury ten-fold danced through her mind. This was her flesh to break. No one else’s.

“Get in,” she husked.

The slave looked hesitantly at the bath, at her.

“Get in. You need it.”

She stepped into the warm water, hunched and set to scrubbing quickly, no doubt used to bathing with little water, less time, and no privacy.

She shook her head. “Stop. Stand up.” Taking the sponge, she began to wipe the grime from strong legs with slow measured strokes. “I thought you Romans were supposed to be obsessed with your baths.”

The slave watched her every move. “Not Roman.”

Her words dropped like coins on impoverished ears. The Conqueror hid her smile. She’d already guessed as much; the slave spoke perfect Greek when she spoke at all. And judging by the tightness of the quiet voice, she objected to the association with her former owners.

“No? Then where are you from?”

Another hesitation. “Poteidaia.”

She faltered, covered by rinsing out the sponge. “When did you leave?”

“Before your army came.”

So she knew the fate of the village. More importantly, she knew who the Conqueror was, perhaps bore a grudge. Danger tickled her spine.

“Why’d you leave then?”

“Stupidity.” The word trickled like bile, hot and sharp, upon her skin. “Choices of a foolish girl.”

She couldn’t imagine the cautious woman ever being foolish. “How did you end up in Rome?”

“Got caught in your war.”

Her war. The war with Caesar. Long and violent, both empires still licked their wounds.

Lost in her thoughts, she almost didn’t notice the body harden under her touch. Was it the tenderness of her bruised belly that triggered the change, or the nearness to her sex? She’d guessed correctly about the rape, doubted it was a one-time event. She kept her movements gentle and predictable as the sponge worked upwards, her impassive gaze locked on green irises, away from the curves and mounds she bathed. She made a point of lowering her arms, making sure the woman knew she was through.

“Alright?” At the gladiator’s barest nod, she gestured to the water. “Sit.”

The Leopard lowered herself in by inches, pausing as hot water brought fresh sting to each cut. Finally she took a breath, dipped beneath the surface. A dark cloud bloomed where she rubbed the back of her head; as she surfaced ruby water trickled down the nape of her neck. The warrior tilted her head forward, peeled the short thick hair aside until she found the ugly gash. “It’s not bad. The bleeding’s almost stopped.” She put a cloth against it, lay the head back against the tub as she rose to retrieve a vial from the table nearby.

“I thought slaves bathed their owners.”

She glared at the woman, ready with a sharp reprimand for such cheek, found wary eyes tracking her movements. Why would an owner bathe her slave personally, unless the bathing was a means to something more...intimate?

She shook her head, dribbled scented Egyptian oil into the water. "Consider this an education on how I want it done." Sitting on the edge of the marble tub, she took one of the Leopard's arms in hers and firmly rubbed sponge and hands from shoulder to fingertips, half-cleaning, half-massaging the knotted limb.

Gradually the gladiator relaxed, part exhaustion, part coaxing from steady hands on muscles and joints stiff with apprehension and abuse. Her eyes wandered away, stared off into the dark corners of the antechamber, looking like they might droop toward sleep.

She fought it, spoke instead. "I was in Scupi when the Romans came. The townspeople arrested me, turned me over to the Roman commander as one of your spies."

"You? Why?"

"I told...lies."

"Lies?"

"Stories. About the gods. About you. Lies. Doesn't matter. They thought the Romans might take mercy on them for their show of loyalty. They were wrong. But the commander kept me, called me...amusing."

"For your stories?" Roman officers usually weren't interested in young women just to hear them talk. Then again, none of this sounded like the history of an accomplished gladiator who spoke to her mistress only sparingly, and to no one else for gods knew how long before that.

The narrative hung like that, words caught in the slave's throat, lost somewhere in a memory never shared. The warrior took her other arm in hand, kneading sore muscles, careful of the long stitched gashes left by the lion so many lifetimes ago.

When she spoke again, the Leopard's voice sounded even more distant. "He let me speak my mind, so long as I counseled him truthfully. I thought he was a good man, tried to help him see it, too. Then...his commander propositioned me. I refused, so he went to my officer, told him I used my stories to spread sedition among the slaves and urge them to revolt."

"Did you?"

The slave's lips drew into a thin line. "His slaves swore I did. I had two choices. I could say I hadn't, basically accuse a general of Rome of lying and be branded a liar myself. Or I could say I had, and sentence myself to death."

“So you said nothing.” The Conqueror pulled one of her feet out of the water, worked it gently to smooth away some tension, keep her talking.

“They tried to force a confession out of me. Every word I spoke in my defense the general twisted into a plot to undermine Rome, until I said nothing at all. It didn’t matter. When we reached Rome, my officer sent me to the auction block.”

She set to work on the other foot. “At least you got away from the general.”

The gladiator shook her head. “The general is the one who bought me and sent me to the arena.”

A soft knock drifted in from the main chamber, interrupting her. “Come, Vidalis! Let’s have a look at those tunics—” She glanced up. Captain Bellerophon stood in the doorway, his mouth slack. The foot pulled from her grasp, retreated under the water. She reined in her irritation. “What’s the reason for this interruption, Captain?”

“Conqueror, I have—I thought you wished to—” He cleared his throat. “Conqueror. May I speak to you in private?”

Water splashed from the tub; the slave stood, eyes down, quick to step out. “Stay,” she commanded. She was of a mind to tell the captain to come back later, but thoughts of Egyptian rebellion crept in. She tossed a towel to the slave, followed him all the way out the chamber door and into the hallway.

“General Pileus sends word from Egypt. While we were in Rome, a legion landed in Alexandria to reinforce Cleopatra’s troops. He fears she may now have enough forces to overcome the Third Army.”

“Or Caesar may be stirring her up to distract us from his movements on our northern border.”

“Either way, a disruption in tribute from Egypt would prove more than a distraction.”

“Perhaps.” A dozen scenarios worked through her head. “I want to speak to the messenger first thing in the morning. And make sure he is well rested so he can return to Egypt as soon as we’re done. Dismissed.”

She moved to return to her chambers, noted the captain lingered. Her eyes narrowed. “Is there something else, Captain?”

“If I may speak freely, Conqueror, your newest slave—”

She gestured to his swollen face. “This better not be about your clumsiness.”

He cleared his throat, tried to sound less nasal. “She lied to you, misidentified the assassin, could be working in collusion—”

“Because it looks to me like you got your nose laid over by a woman half your size and are trying to cover your incompetence.”

A vein rose across his forehead. “My men and I were following your orders—”

She smirked. “Yes, right up to the moment you ordered your men to kill her.”

He set his jaw. “Forgive me, Conqueror. She disobeyed your orders, attacked us when we tried to put her in chains. I had to ensure the safety of my men.”

She got in his face. “Let me make this absolutely clear, Captain. You don’t have the authority to order the death of one of my slaves. In fact, you don’t have the authority to do anything to my slaves. Ever.”

She turned away, conversation over.

“You seem awfully attached to this week’s toy, Conqueror. I must say I find her control over you disturbing.”

She slammed him back against a wall, her forearm pressed into his throat. “Do you have a death wish?”

“Forgiveness,” he squawked. “I know the Destroyer of Nations would not go soft over a girl, so I can only believe some sort of plot is at work. Hers. Or perhaps Caesar’s.”

She shoved him harder. “Speak plainly.”

“Before we left Rome I asked around. Gracchus was not her original owner. Before that she was a spoil of war.”

“I know all this,” she growled, her forearm grinding into his windpipe.

“The Leopard belonged to Caesar,” he squeaked. “Her loyalties lie with Caesar.”

She searched his face, looking for deception. Found none. She let up on his throat, her lips twisted in a snarl. “You know nothing about her loyalties.”

Each breath whistled with effort. “He wanted you to meet her. After seeing your interest, he must have pulled strings to have her fight two days in a row, something unheard of in the arena. He arranged the private fights through Gracchus. Perhaps he planned to offer her as a gift, get her close to you so she could earn your confidence—”

“And then kill me? She could have tried many times by now.”

“Kill you. Spy on you. Undermine you.”

She dropped him. She wanted to hit him, settled for the wall instead. He pulled himself upright, gasping and rubbing his neck.

“I just ask that you be careful. Caesar knows you, knows how to get under your skin. That slave is definitely under your skin. Please, Conqueror.”

She barely heard him. Did Caesar arrange to have the Leopard fight in the arena, knowing she would fascinate the Conqueror? Were the legionnaires who attacked the ship sent by Gracchus to reclaim his prize, or by Caesar to contact his slave with orders to kill her new mistress? Did the gladiator make a mistake or deliberately accuse the wrong man of plotting to assassinate her? None of it fit together but parts had the stink of that pompous bastard all over it.

Her gut told her Bellerophon was wrong, yet she couldn't deny his logic. The gladiator was a danger. She'd already proven she could get a deadly strike through the warrior's defenses. And she'd surely lost family when the Conqueror's army razed her village. And no one knew better than Xena how Caesar could twist a person's mind when he wanted something. Only a fool would ignore such a threat.

She sighed. “What would you suggest?”

“Send her to the slaves' quarters. Or post guards in your chambers. Or at least keep her chained for your own safety. I cannot protect you if you won't protect yourself.”

She turned away, paused with her hand on the latch. “Send for Joxer,” she murmured before stepping back inside.

Niklos dozed, well under the sleeping draught's magic. Nevertheless, she carefully shut the doors to the main chamber.

The slave approached hesitantly, wearing the torn Roman tunic once more. Her eyes searched the Conqueror's, questions lurking in their shadowed depths.

“Who was this general who bought you?”

The question startled the slave. Her mouth opened a few times before she managed an answer. “A nobleman accomplished in the arts of war—”

She grabbed the woman by the neck, ignored the strong hands that clamped around her forearm. “Don't play games with me. Did you lie to your old commander?”

“Never.”

“Did you ever withhold the truth from him?”

The jaw clamped shut, refused to answer.

The Conqueror growled, gave the slave a rough shake. “You listen to me, girl. You can play your silence games with anyone else you want, but I know you have a tongue. When I ask a question, you will answer me, and you will answer truthfully. What general bought you and sent you to the arena?”

The woman struggled, gave in reluctantly. “Gaius Julius—”

“—Caesar,” she hissed. Her fingers dug deeper into the corded throat. “How long did you serve him?”

“Two, maybe three summers.”

“In what capacity?”

Heat flushed the young face. “As his gladiator.”

“Is that all?”

The gladiator’s hesitation gave her away.

“I see. How else did you serve him?”

She gritted her teeth. “You already know.”

“Say it.”

“Why?” Her quiet voice trembled.

“I’m curious. How often did you grace his bed? Were you an amusement? Or a co-conspirator? Did you like what he did to you?”

The gladiator snarled, grabbed the dark triangle of the warrior’s sex half-hidden under the robe. “Did you?”

The rage in her eyes, the heat of her grab stole the Conqueror’s breath away. She stood there, torn between killing the gladiator where she stood and finishing what the hand between her thighs started.

Color drained from the gladiator’s face as she realized what she’d done. She swallowed hard, unsure and still.

A knock on the door made them both jump, break contact. The Conqueror pulled the robe closed. “Enter.”

The scarred guard stepped in, bowed formally. “You sent for me?”



The Conqueror still felt the flush of heat in her cheeks, turned away before the guard noticed it. “Escort the Leopard to the slave’s quarters. Tell the foreman she is not to be assigned duties, merely a cot to sleep on and a clean tunic. I will send for her when I require her services.” She retrieved from the floor the collar, manacles, and chain, held them up to the gladiator. “To restrain you or not? In my palace, slaves are merely collared; only prisoners are shackled. Which are you?”

She didn’t expect the woman to answer in front of an audience. After long moments of consideration, she locked the collar into place, snapped the manacles on her wrists. “Behave yourself and perhaps I’ll change my mind.”

## 19 Discipula Medici

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### The Healer’s Apprentice

Thirsty.

More than once she awoke in a dim room, dragged from the depths of strange dreams by chill air across her skin, a heat underneath that turned her tongue to swollen sandpaper. Sometimes she could tell she was ill, but those moments of lucidity wove seamlessly with memory and illusion. The room offered no windows or doors to the outside. Upon each waking she couldn’t tell whether it was day or night, could only sense the rhythms of activity when she was aware enough to care.

Time passed by unchecked, and what little she remembered bled together with her fevered imagination. The guard who often came to her bedside metamorphosed into a giant menacing gladiator, his face hidden behind a scarred Greek tragedy mask, whereupon they dueled for Rome’s favor. A boy who came in to drain the chamber pot transformed into Caesar, resplendent in fine white and gold robes. With a gesture he commanded the cots to rise, reshaping themselves into guards to hold her down while he cut out her tongue. The withered healer with the foul drink and fingers like spikes jabbed her in the neck, let her lie there stiff and panicked while he—now she, having turned into the Conqueror—bent low and whispered tender reassurances that such tortures were for the good of Greece. Disembodied hands drifted across fiery skin, released one heat trapped underneath with cool relief, ignited another kind of heat more difficult to extinguish. Bright blue eyes held hers as fingertips brushed sweat-soaked hair off of her forehead, stroked her cheek. She couldn’t even lift her arms in response, but the kind touch was shade from blazing summer sun; she pressed her face into the relief of the cool hand, forced the only word she could think of—*Xena*—past a thick and contrary tongue. But the woman who recoiled from her had yellow hair, not black. Then she too passed away into heated darkness.

She woke drenched in sweat, drained but alert. Her body ached, but it was not in her nature to lie still. With effort she swung her legs off the cot, steadied herself, peered around. She didn’t recognize the long room full of cots. Definitely not the slave quarters where she’d fallen asleep

under the scarred soldier's watchful eye. Other than a few dozing forms and two people keeping to themselves in the far corner, the space was deserted. That suited her fine; she needed a chamber pot. She squatted, did her business, amazed there was any liquid left in her body to squeeze out. Water would help. Water would wash the fur from her tongue, ease the pounding in her skull.

A push and she was up, lurching toward the bucket near the door of the room. The wet felt good on parched lips, settled in her stomach without threat of rejection. Propped on her elbows, she splashed some on her face, dumped some over her soaked head, down her flushed shoulders and back, drank some more.

It helped. Feeling stronger, braver, she made her way to the doorway, scanned the hall. Empty. Daylight trickled down a stairwell at one end, promised fresh air, a respite from the rank odor of sickness and humanity. She saw no bars, bore no chains. Shaky legs carried her of their own accord.

“Stop!”

She sagged against the wall, caught.

The guard jogged past her to block the passage to the stairs. Just out of arm's reach, she could clearly make out the ragged scar that traced down his forehead, crossed the bridge of his nose and creased his cheek before fading at his jawline. It looked no less menacing than it had in her dreams, but a mildness tempered his expression, muted her anxiety.

“You're going back to the infirmary. I have orders not to let you out of my sight.”

She stared past him to drink in the light filtering down the stairwell, inhale the faintly salty air, feel the cool settle on her skin. She looked at him again, her eyes asking.

“No. You are not allowed to leave the infirmary unrestrained.”

She offered up her wrists, more than willing to tolerate chains for a breath of freedom.

“No, absolutely not. No way.”

She sighed, so close. But Scar made no move to manhandle her back to the infirmary. Propped against the wall on unsteady knees, she leaned her head back, let her eyes slide shut. Sounds floated down the stairs. A man shouted to a stable boy to move his horse. A woman told others tales as they worked. Metal rang against metal in an uneven staccato of sword play. Words—no longer banned from her existence—sprung unbidden, gradually strung themselves into thoughts, knitted themselves into scenes, grew into stories. She shook her head to clear it, but imaginings wormed into her tired mind's eye, tales of heroes and noblewomen and gods entwined in a frayed tapestry woven around one enigmatic warrior princess.

Memories crept in, always unwelcome. These she pushed away, but one stubborn whisper slipped through the darkness of a muggy night.

“She’ll help us.”

Long moments, as his panting settled in the stillness. And then he slid off of her, the mood broken. “Gabrielle, they’re her officers. She sent them here. They do what they do in her name.”

“She would never order the mutilation of an innocent girl—”

“Why, because of those stories you tell? Are those stories even true?”

Her heart pounded in her throat. “Perdicus, she doesn’t know what’s happening here. If Xen—if the Conqueror knew, she’d have that officer crucified by morning. The Conqueror’s severe, yes, but impartial. In her own way. A letter is—”

“Alright.”

“—our only chance. Things will only get worse if we don’t—”

Lips swallowed her words as he pressed her down into their pallet, a long insistent kiss she slowly softened into. He pulled away, and though she couldn’t see his face, she could feel his broad grin.

A deep breath. “If this is an attempt to placate me—”

Gently, “I said I’ll sign it. Tomorrow,” punctuated by another kiss, this one sampling the perspiration pooled in the hollow of her throat. He began to move again with purpose, and she wrapped her legs around him wordlessly, her thoughts a thousand leagues away.

Cold metal clamped around her wrists, jolted her back to the dim passage outside the infirmary. Scar held open the collar. Halfheartedly she lifted her chin, held still while he latched it into place, turned to trudge back down into darkness.

He headed up instead, paused when she didn’t follow. She stared at him uncomprehendingly, but shaky legs stumbled up the steps of their own volition. He took her arm, steadied her until they reached the top.

The courtyard was large, larger than the senator’s, yet less grand for its spare architecture and absence of color or decoration. Roman-style arches formed a loggia, sheltering them from the white sunlight rebounding off the hard-packed dirt. She shrank from the luminous assault, ducked her head behind arms heavier than the chains that bound them, backpedaled until a wall blocked her retreat. Even squeezed shut, her eyes throbbed against the brightness. A breeze tickled her skin, carried smells of the sea, the city, horses, people, food. She slid down to sit on the flagstone, content to absorb the open air and rest in the shade of the portico while her eyes adjusted.

Her escort found a spot just in the corner of her vision at the length of the chain, watched her intently for any sign of trouble. She offered none, kept herself at ease so he would have no reason to cut short this indulgence. She liked him. It had been a long time since a guard had stood watch over her without contempt, lust, fear, or hatred. He gave her space and waited, so calm and still that she almost forgot he was there, could imagine herself sitting under the loggia like a freewoman, watching the world rush by.

A clatter of sandals rushing up the stairs ruined the illusion; a woman burst into the courtyard, eyes frantically searching until they lit upon the slave and her escort. "What are you doing up here? Trying to kill yourself?"

She recognized the kinked blonde curls from her dream, the woman she'd mistaken for her owner.

In the lengthening silence, Scar cleared his throat. "She looks a lot better."

The woman arched an eyebrow. "Are you a healer now, Dragon?"

The gladiator could hear the tight control in his voice. "No, apprentice, but the fresh air seems to be improving her color. I was going to return her to the infirmary shortly."

The apprentice considered his excuse, looked down at her patient. The Leopard remained rooted to the ground, determined not to move a muscle unless the soldier commanded it.

With a sigh, the woman crouched down in front of her and put an arm to her forehead, glaring at her when she jerked away. She held out a palm for the bandaged hand but waited patiently, not forcing any contact.

The gladiator looked down at the forgotten wound, curiously flexed it. It felt tender, itched. Itching was good. She unwrapped the cloth, clenched her fist. Half-healed skin stretched taut and white across the back of her hand.

The healer took it, pressed calloused fingertips into the back of her wrist, up her forearm over almost translucent skin. "Infection's gone." She took the other arm, examined the triple lines of scars, the paired rows of tiny black holes where stitches once bound flesh. The gladiator raised the hem of her tunic, prodded the matching marks on her leg, tested the muscle with a minimum of discomfort. Clearly she'd been sick more than a day.

The healer's apprentice leaned back, gave her the once over, squinted up at the soldier. "Don't stay long. The Conqueror will put us both in the infirmary if she doesn't get well." The gladiator craned her neck, watched her go curiously. When her mind wandered this time, she found herself thinking of the woman's coarse palms and firm grip, imagining how she might have acquired them.

The apprentice's visit shattered the mood. Soon the weight of the collar shifted; Scar stood close by, gave her a moment to get used to the idea before ordering her up. Reluctantly she left

the salt air and bright glare of Mediterranean sun, followed him back down the stairs to the stale infirmary. As they reached the door she took a chance, lay a light hand on his arm, pulled back quickly when he half-spun, hand on the pommel of his sword. She held up her hands to show she meant no harm. How to convey what she wanted to say? She settled for a tight nod, not knowing how else to—

“You’re welcome.” It fell so softly from his expressionless lips, it almost seemed spoken by another. He produced a key and unlocked the restraints. “It’s a one time deal, so don’t get used to it.”

She nodded again with the faintest smile. He’d already given her more than she could have hoped for.

But the next day he appeared in the doorway of the infirmary while she ate lunch, discretely revealed the collar hidden behind his back. She went to him willingly, kept trusting eyes on his face while he chained her. He glanced over her shoulder, nodding to the healer’s apprentice, then led her back up the stairs to the courtyard.

This time they stayed more than a candlemark. Her eyes roamed every corner of the quadrangle, absorbing faces, noting roles and interactions, studying the patterns of the guards, when and where they paced. An old habit, one she acquired years ago as a new slave considering escape.

Her attention most often fell on the soldiers in the center of the square, exercising and drilling. She liked especially to watch them spar, how far apart they circled to stay out of range of those long swords, what stances they preferred, what tactics they used to block and counterattack. Though not as consistently trained as Roman gladiators, they did share some moves in common. And even after the guard returned her to the infirmary, she passed the time as she had for the last three years, mentally working on possible counters and feints and new techniques to confound their strengths and take advantage of their weaknesses. One never knew when such information might come in handy.

Thoughts of the Conqueror receded, although they were never very far away. Every day reminded her that she was a prisoner in the palace of the Conqueror of Greece, that she remained a slave of the Destroyer of Nations, that at any moment this fantasy of freedom would end and she would find herself before the mercurial woman again—and have to face the consequences of their last heated encounter.

The bath. Caesar. She’d let herself be goaded, had been a fool to grab her like that. Gods only knew what the warrior thought of her now, much less what she thought of herself. Did she grope the Conqueror to make a point, or an offer?

She sighed, willing the ache behind her eyes to go away. She would have to explain—

Conversation. Gods, how she missed it. No, not it. She felt no urge to share her thoughts with her escort, kind though he may be. No, it was the Conqueror’s company she missed. Why did

words too priceless to reveal to anyone else spill out when alone in her presence? For the longest time the slave had abandoned language altogether, even in her thoughts, only trusting her eyes and feelings and gut reactions. Why not with the Conqueror?

She was too conflicted to answer that question. After the massacre of Poteidaia, after the war and Scupi and Caesar, after the last few days of abuse, a normal person would hate the woman. But she couldn't dredge up the emotion. Instead her heart ached to know why, ached to explain herself in return. Experience taught her such desires, such thoughts were dangerous. Where the heart and mind went, so followed the mouth. Even more reason to dread an encounter with the Conqueror. She felt her restraint slipping, feared what sort of reaction her impulsive words might provoke in the dangerous woman.

Or in herself.

## 20 Iustitia Harena

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### Arena Justice

When Scar arrived, no one in the infirmary seemed surprised, least of all her. Impatiently she presented her throat and wrists for restraint, sped up the stairs to the dusty yard. After a week of confinement it was hard to sit still; she stretched, testing muscles and joints antsy with lack of use. Oh, to swing a sword again.

Though her escort stayed out of the way, he still kept a tight leash on her. She resorted to weaponless drills and exercises to work off pent up energy. The short length of chain between collar and manacles forced her to modify many of the movements, led to no end of frustration, but the workout felt good. And the modifications would prove useful should a fight come her way while wearing the damned thing.

Perhaps sooner than later. Two of the soldiers who'd watched her practice ambled toward her, trouble written in their smirks.

"Cute, isn't she? Reminds me of a kitten tangled up in yarn."

"She reminds me of my last fuck, squirming that tight ass while I pinned her."

The first one laughed nervously at his friend's vulgarity.

The Leopard ignored them both, continued to practice, but out of the corner of her eye she took in the second one's demeanor, the cocky attitude, the flicker of a tongue across his teeth. Neither wore the distinctive uniform of her escort, the polished steel cuirass and blue tunic of the Conqueror's personal guard.

The crude man's jibes grew raunchier, though the gladiator didn't hear most of it. Talk like that was as common as breath. She didn't take the comments personally, knew the soldier only looked at her as he looked at almost every other woman he dealt with save his mother. At least she could defend herself. She only felt some twinge of pity for the other women who crossed the man's path. Like Orenia, the scullery maid he spoke of as he demonstrated with a smile the manly art of violation.

"That's enough, sir." Her escort stepped forward, disgust written in the pinch of his scar. "Get back to your practice."

The gladiator stayed clear of the confrontation, let her body run through routines as natural as sleeping. But they stood too close to be ignored.

"Joxer? I didn't know they demoted you to prison guard."

If he registered the insult, he didn't let on. "Go back to your business, Lieutenant, if you know what's best for you."

"C'mon, we just wanted to have a bit of fun with her," said the younger one, trying to make light of his friend's harassment.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught Scar looking her over. "I'm certain that would be a mistake, Eurysthetes. On many levels."

The young soldier stepped in, started to pull the bolder man away, but the lieutenant wasn't having it. "No, no. I think Joxer's gotten a bit full of himself, forgotten his roots. Give him fancy armor and he thinks he's better than his old commander, isn't that right?"

"Sir—"

"Remember that skinny little kid from Athens who could barely draw a sword without getting stuck on his scabbard? Look at him now. He gets promoted to the elite guard and thinks he doesn't owe his old mates a favor or two. We just want to see what this girl is made of, see what she thinks she knows. Is that so bad?"

To her ears it sounded like a lose-lose situation. Refuse to fight and get the stuffing knocked out of her, or fight and face the wrath of the Conqueror for killing two of her soldiers, more if their comrades decided to get involved. She gave the chain a tug, waited for her escort to look at her before indicating the door back down to the infirmary.

He stared the officer down. "You've been in the heat too long, Lieutenant. Go cool off." He turned, motioned for her to get moving.

Under the shaded portico she felt a wash of relief from both sun and threat.

A crash and a wrench on the chain snapped her around. The lieutenant pinned her escort to the ground, yanked the chain from his grip. The Leopard jerked it out of his hand, kicked him across the temple hard enough to stun him. He slumped over her prone export, unmoving.

His young companion wasn't smiling anymore, gaped at the limp officer before drawing his sword. She placed herself between him and her unconscious escort, spun the heavy chain casually, getting used to the weight and short reach of her wrists. The chain and her fierce look seemed enough to warn the young soldier back. In the fringes of her vision, more soldiers ran from the practice field.

Scar groaned, slowly shoved the lieutenant off, pushed himself up. Reinforcements closed fast. The urge to run made her shudder; being surrounded by dozens of armed soldiers in an uncontrolled brawl sounded like suicide. Her escort didn't need defending. He wasn't the one they wanted. But where would she run to? The infirmary? Hardly defensible. In a few leaps she could be on top of the walls, take on the sentries. And go where? She knew nothing about the palace, where to go beyond the four walls of her open prison. Besides, being unarmed was a small problem. Being chained was a big problem. No, her only chance was to protect him, hope he could diffuse the situation.

"What in Tartarus is going on here?"

Or be rescued by a feisty blonde apprentice.

Eurysthetes' eyes went wide, took in the scene nervously. "Ephiny, she tried to escape, attacked her guard and Lieutenant Ramis."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?"

Or a certain dark-haired warrior.

The Destroyer strode across the courtyard purposefully, looked between him and the men on the ground, finally settled on the slave. A throng of curious servants and freemen cut off any route of escape. Only one option remained. The Leopard dropped to her knees, depositing the end of the chain at her owner's feet. The woman stared down at her, her expression cold, looked away as if looking past furniture. "Joxer, what's this all about?"

Scar pushed to his feet, winced as he fingered a growing lump on his forehead, straightened when he realized who addressed him. "Conqueror. It's nothing. These men saw your slave practicing and wanted to spar with her. I didn't think that was wise without getting your permission first."

"Is that so?" She searched the faces of the young soldier and the woozy lieutenant.

"Your slave?" The young man blanched. "Conqueror, we didn't know—"



“Permission granted.” A malevolent grin played across her features, left a queasy feeling in the pit of the Leopard’s stomach. “Lieutenant Ramis, on your feet. Joxer, release her.”

She held her breath, heart hammering. Her escort’s familiar hands fumbled with the manacles, the collar, relieved her of the weight. Still kneeling she gazed up, trying to glean from her owner’s expression the rules of this game.

The Conqueror turned that look of wicked pleasure upon her, pitched her voice for the group to hear. “Don’t kill ‘em.”

The soldiers laughed in unison, hemmed them in under the covered portico.

A show then. She stood, turned to face the pair, sounds around her fading to a faint buzz. Eurysthetes did not smile at the joke, flicked the tip of his long sword nervously. Ramis remained calm if slightly unsteady as he drew his sword, his cockiness bolstered by a chance to save face.

Her hands itched, anxious and empty. Rule number one: never fight an armed opponent unarmed.

The lieutenant made the first move, took an experimental swing at her midsection. She jumped back, not so early as to make it look expected, not so far back as to make it look easy. It would take several more retreats to lure him in. Would the circle give, make room for her withdrawal? A quick glance back; the spectators seemed inclined to stay, pin her in the small space.

Rule number two: never let yourself be cornered.

A slash of Ramis’s sword came closer than she liked, sliced open the belly of the brown tunic with an audible rip. The crowd hummed with excitement. She put a hand to her stomach, glanced down find a thin red line painting her palm. The lieutenant bared his teeth, a wolf sampling the scent of prey. Another jump back and her shoulder blades pressed against the broad chest of a soldier stubbornly blocking her retreat. She clenched her jaw.

Rule number three. Never fight two when you can fight one.

He swung again. She ducked low, shot underneath the whistling blade and knuckle-punched the man’s unarmored armpit, drove her foot into the back of his knee and stomped his kneecap into the ground with an audible crack. As he crumpled she grabbed his sword, wrenched it out of the ribcage of the wheezing bystander he’d hit with his wild swing and spun away, crossing swords with the young soldier.

He blinked, unsure how she suddenly stood there. When he blinked again she swept his leg out and dropped him on his back, the sword skittering from his hand.

In a heartbeat the wet red blade flicked back to the lieutenant, followed his progress as he hobbled to his feet, pulling the wounded soldier's own sword from its scabbard to face her. He should have given up then, tallied his losses at bruised ribs, a swollen knee, and a wounded ego. Had he raised a finger in defeat, she might have left him alone. Might have. But he'd said some things, done some things that struck too close to home, things a man ought not do to a woman against her will. Even a slave.

She wrestled with her rage, forced herself to plant the heavy sword tip down on the ground and rest her hands lightly on the pommel. Let him come if he wanted to. She would not make the first move.

His nostrils flared with ugly pride. His blade lunged for her heart.

Almost as surely as he had her, he missed her. She turned her shoulder away, sword brushing sword aside by the tiniest of margins. The tip of her blade slipped between his legs, carved up and away, flinging a messy arc of dark fluid across the ring of spectators.

Silence crashed down on the impromptu assembly, loud enough to penetrate even her combat haze. In the hush, his sword clattered to the flagstone. He stood frozen, his mouth wrapped around a soundless O, the pressure of his clamped knees the only thing holding him up. Coolly she padded over to face the Conqueror, dropped the stained sword and knelt again, watching her for a reaction. The warrior arched an eyebrow, reappraising her. Would she be punished? Certainly the crowd would clamor for it once they realized what she'd done.

The Conqueror said nothing. With a gesture the collar and wrist shackles snapped back into place, the key placed in her waiting hand.

Sounds began to filter back to life, murmurings. "Dead...killed him...murderer..."

"Ephiny?"

The apprentice's voice came back tight. "He lives, Conqueror, but I must get him to the infirmary immediately if there is any hope of saving..."

The gladiator knew what she meant to save, knew there was little chance of that. A dangerous grumble rippled through the crowd as they realized it too. "Butcher." "Amazon." "Castrator."

"You men, help her." Xena's pale blue eyes scanned the rest of the crowd for trouble.

"She mutilated him!" came a faceless shout.

"What of it?" the Conqueror challenged. "He's alive; that's all I require."

"He's better off dead!" someone else cried.

She drew her sword. “And the rest of you? Would you be better off dead? Who wants to find out?” No one stepped up to the challenge. “I thought so. Now get back to your business, unless you want to be clapped in irons too!”

A sweep of the Conqueror’s sword dispersed much of the crowd. Her hand dug into the Leopard’s upper arm, dragged her to her feet and away, not down the stairs to the infirmary but to a similar doorway leading down into darkness. It reeked of old blood, rancid meat, sewage. The gladiator recoiled against the smell, but Xena didn’t slow. Joxer grabbed a torch, followed them down a long corridor of cells. “Macon!”

A silhouette appeared in the light at the end of the passage, trotted toward them. Quickly the grimy soldier unlocked the door, held it open as the Conqueror dragged her inside.

“Leave us!”

The jailer flashed a rotten-toothed grin, saluted and left.

“You too, Joxer. Wait upstairs.”

He reluctantly placed the torch in a sconce outside the cell, retreated back the way they’d come, until the only sounds in the small cell were the lick of the torch flames and the pounding of the gladiator’s heart in her ears.

“That was a stupid thing to do.”

She sounded angry and sorry at the same time, and for a moment the gladiator wasn’t sure if she spoke of the Leopard’s choices, or her own. She stretched to her full height, faced the Conqueror unapologetically.

“These men are tight-knit. I trained them that way. To be injured is expected, but to be reduced to a eunuch is a fate the law reserves for rapists—”

“He is.”

“He raped you?”

She snorted. “No. I would have killed him, orders or not. He rapes others and brags.”

“Bragging is not proof!”

She shrugged coldly. “It was a fight. Mistakes happen. He had options. He opted to provoke it, to accept your challenge, to keep fighting when he was already beaten. I opted to ignore his taunting, to beg for your intervention, to give you and him plenty of chances to stop it. He kept coming. What other choice did I have?”

“You know damn well you had a choice! ‘Mistakes?’ You don’t make mistakes. Not like that. You planned it, led him right into it—”

“And would do it again.”

The Conqueror’s mouth tightened to a thin line. “You force me—”

Her temper boiled over. “No. You force me. This is who I am. You tell me to fight, I fight. You tell me to kill, I kill. This is all I know. If I rid the world of a few men like him, then I take some small comfort from it. If you want to punish me for being exactly what you paid for, then go ahead.” Bands of anger clamped down on her chest. When the woman didn’t answer, she forced an exhale, blinked away the spots in her eyes.

The Conqueror continued, her voice low and even. “You force me to put you here for your own safety. The men will want revenge, and the infirmary is too accessible. Only Macon and I will have the key to your cell. Your escort Joxer will be by every day to check on you, bring you food and drink until the men calm down.”

She unlocked the restraints from her neck and wrists, noted the rip across the front of the tunic, the oozing cut, took a quick look before dismissing it. “It’s only a scratch. Just keep it clean.” She took in the dirty straw on the floor, the foul hole in the corner. “I’ll send someone tomorrow to make sure.” She gathered up the restraints and stepped out, shut the cell door behind her. There she paused. “You fought well today.”

Perhaps the Conqueror’s unexpected praise lent the gladiator some measure of confidence. Or perhaps the threat of their discussion ending pushed her to bring it up. “Xena? The other day, I—”

Brittle eyes bored into her. “I told you not to call me that.”

She lost her nerve, licked her lips, changed her mind. “I never thanked you for rescuing me from the senator.”

“Rescuing you? I didn’t rescue you. I bought you, plain and simple.”

“Why? You don’t even have an arena.”

The Conqueror’s face remained blank. “Then I guess I’ll need to build one.”

Chilled by the response, she forced her tone to be neutral. “Would it please the Conqueror to spar again?”

The corner of Xena’s mouth twitched as if to smile, quickly faded to the narrowed squint of suspicion. “Is that what you wish?”

She kicked herself for not keeping quiet. Slaves don't ask to fight their owners. "My wishes are irrelevant. I belong to Greece. I serve Greece as she sees fit."

Clearly not the right answer by the set of the Conqueror's jaw. "And if that means death in the arena?"

Some tension left her shoulders. "I expect nothing else."

The Conqueror's eyebrow floated into her hairline. "Well, Leopard. You'll have your wish." She collected the torch and retreated down the hall, leaving the dungeon in darkness.

## 21 Custodia

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### The Prisoner

The girl enjoyed dreams. They took her places she'd only heard about in stories, to the lands of the Gauls, the Pharaohs, the Persians, more distant lands she couldn't imagine. In them she found freedom, or at least some pale shadow of it. Dreams made her heart hurt with longing, but they also brought joy, and hope. Her waking life was nothing without hope. Dreams nourished her soul.

The girl let the woman she'd become deal with the nightmares. Like the one she woke with, cloaking her in pain and nausea. Her whole body shook with the violence of it, her eyes sightless but for the vision, her ears filled with screams. Her screams.

Her jaw clamped down only to find it already shut. No sound passed from her lips, just an echo of the nightmare.

Slowly the memory of it faded. She drew long quivering breaths, reassured herself that the broken body of her hallucination was somewhat whole and inviolate. She tried to will her trembling limbs into some semblance of stillness. They refused to obey, keyed in to some primal reaction she couldn't override. She curled in, pulled the wool blanket tighter around her.

Another scream. A woman's, high and hollow. It sent a tremor down her spine. She knew that noise as intimately as she knew her own body, a yowl of pain, rage, and horror.

The feral thing within twitched, pulse and breath quick, hackles high, claws dug in, every nerve on edge. As the cry died out she sagged back, shivering.

The next howl brought her hands to her ears, before she ground her teeth, forced them back down to her side. Screams like that deserved to be heard. That kind of pain needed to be shared.

She forced herself up, crept across the floor to press her cheek against the bars. The direction she'd come down sat dark and silent with night. The other direction, the deepest end of the long narrow hallway, glowed faintly with the flicker of torchlight. She couldn't see to the end, could just make out the dull reflection of several cell doors across the way, their doors hanging open and hungry.

Another shout, hoarse and broken, an involuntary response to agony grown familiar. The absence of other sounds made her skin crawl. No cracks of the whip, no crunch of flesh and bone, no voices of questioning or taunting, no grunts of exertion or pleasure. She forced down a shudder, extended her hearing to its very limits.

The faint ring of metal dropped on sand. The rasp of a whisper, low and soft. The creak of leather pulled tight. All drowned out by that horrific scream.

The girl inside covered her ears.

Echoing footsteps sent her skittering away from the door. She made herself small in the darkest corner of her cell, held her breath as the hooded figure strode by until footsteps faded up the stairs. She sucked in deep ragged breaths, pushed back sweat-soaked bangs with hands that shook, refused to be still.

She almost missed the arrival of another cloaked visitor, thinner than the first, more cautious. Soft sandals whispered on the flagstone, moved swiftly and silently by. Neither visitor carried illumination; as before, the figure passed without feeling her stare. It headed toward the source of the sounds, and once out of sight and hearing, the Leopard couldn't resist the urge to creep to the edge of the cell once more.

Two figures dragged a third down the hall, put their burden in a cell across the corridor, far enough down that she could barely see it from her angle. Not that it would have mattered; a solid metal door blocked any view of the inside. The jailor left, returned with a candle, then locked the visitor in with the prisoner.

Quietly there came humming, strange formless notes woven into a forlorn melody. It might have sounded comforting if not for the singer's cracking voice.

Drained, the gladiator leaned her head back against the wall and listened, rode the simple song out of the palace to the wilder, happier places of a girl's dreams.

## 22 Adventi

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The rattle of a key woke her. Disoriented, it took her a moment to remember the cell, how she came to sleep with her head resting against the coarse iron bars of the door. Kneecaps filled her vision, dirty legs and grubby boots half-lit by daylight trickling down the stairwell. She rolled away to her feet, crouched and ready to fight before Scar stepped in front of the jailer.

The door locked behind him, left them alone.

“Brought you food.” He presented a bowl and spoon from behind his back. The pasty gruel looked cold, but she took it, tentatively sampled it before wolfing it down. He grinned, an almost ridiculous expression the way the scar twisted it. “You better slow down. You’ll only encourage the cook by eating as if you like it.”

She did slow down, gradually noticed him watching her intently, enough to make her uncomfortable. Overcast green eyes stared him down until he looked away.

“Sorry.” He ground the straw under his boot, his lips pursed in thought. “The Conqueror says you attacked the lieutenant when he jumped me, kept the other one off me.”

She stared into the empty bowl, refused to meet his eyes.

“I don’t know why you did it, but I know you didn’t have to. Thanks.”

She chewed on her lip, finally nodded.

He almost smiled at the acknowledgement. Finally he made up his mind, voiced the question he longed to ask. “Why don’t you say anything?”

The gladiator dropped her gaze, vaguely shrugged. She liked him. She really did. But he was not *her*.

Scar finally shrugged. “Hey, it doesn’t matter. I appreciate a person of few words. I don’t usually say much either. I’m not very good at explaining myself, but it’s easy to talk to you. There’s no pressure to sound smart, and I don’t have to worry about you butting in all the time, y’know?” He offered a self-conscious smirk, an out-of-place expression on his usually hard face. In spite of herself, the corners of her mouth curled around a tiny but genuine smile.

He cleared his throat, dropped his gaze to study the ground as he considered his next words. “You probably don’t remember, but I was there that night in the senator’s yard. All I’m trying to say is, I make a pretty good listener, too.”

She stood absolutely still, unsure what to do. Before the moment became too awkward, he nodded, collected the bowl and spoon from her and headed back to the door. “I brought some bread and water for later. Try to make it last. I won’t see you again until tomorrow, but the healer or his apprentice should be by later this afternoon. I’ll go now...unless you’d like me to stay?”

His question surprised her. There was no need for him to stay; she wasn't going anywhere. And after years of sharing almost every moment of every day with slaves, servants, masters, and guards, constantly on her guard against being touched, abused, violated, or killed, she treasured any rare moment of solitude. But after last night...she nodded, backed away to lean against the far wall out of habit. Stand too close to a guard and they could get ideas.

He remained near the door. Minutes passed in silence. Not like the courtyard. Awkward empty minutes. In the small space, she had nothing to look at, nothing to study but him. His scar. Wonder how he got it.

Other handlers might have taken the eye contact as a challenge, beaten her for it. He looked away, uncomfortable. Just for a moment, before he took a deep breath.

"It happened in Athens. I shouldn't have been there. My old man..." He shook his head, met her eyes with a serious look of his own. "I just wanted...to be part of something." He snorted. "She was definitely something. I didn't even know how to use a sword. My first battle, someone gave me this. I should've died. But she..." He flushed, shrugged. "It was the first time I ever saw her. I'm sure it was just another kill for her. But she spared me one glance, one look. 'Do better.'"

Gabrielle could see it, a young man sprawled in the dirt, his once-soft face laid open to the bone, blinking the blood out of his eye to stare up at his rescuer. Worship glistened in his look, then and now. The Dragon would rather die than let her down again.

He cleared his throat. "Enough of that. I sound like some doe-eyed... Hey, did I tell you I have kids?"

He launched into one story after another, and it must have been after midday when he finally pushed up for a stretch, ending with a grin. "You let me talk too much. Macon!"

She stood clear while the prison guard let him out, locked the cell door behind him.

He held up the empty bowl. "I'll be back tomorrow with a lot more food. Stay out of trouble, alright?"

His request was heartfelt. She couldn't help but smirk and nod her head as he headed up the stairs and out of sight.

She passed the afternoon in the small space practicing, stirring up a sweat, until the cell darkened, the weak afternoon light blocked by a visitor. Ephiny waited for the keeper to let her in, said nothing until he disappeared again. Finally she sighed. "You've done nothing since you arrived but cause me extra work. Lieutenant Ramis kept us up half the night." She set down her healer's pouch, hooked one finger at the gladiator. "Let me see this wound."



The Leopard made a face, waved her off. The apprentice closed in anyway. “Listen, I have direct orders from the Conqueror to make sure you are well. She will be most displeased if you keep me from doing my duties. Let’s just hurry up and get this over with.”

The slave set her jaw, stripped the torn tunic. Cleaning the scratch took little time. She spent a little longer tending older injuries.

“Where did you learn that move? The one you used on Lieutenant Ramis?”

The day she learned that move came back to her with crystal clarity, as did the amazing gladiator who taught her. Her mentor. Her friend, just weeks before— She shrugged, avoided that gaze.

Ephiny’s lips drew tight. “When you were sick she came to visit you. The Conqueror. You called for her by name. No one calls her by her name. Who is she to you? Who are you to her?”

She clamped down on her surprise. That she spoke in her delirium worried her; what other secrets had she betrayed to this woman? Worse, she spoke the one word she was absolutely forbidden to say. Was that why the Conqueror didn’t send for her?

At her long silence, the apprentice let out a held breath, packed her salves away. “Try to keep straw and dirt out of that cut. Guard!”

As he approached, the Leopard gestured to the pouch of medicines the healer carried, pointed down the corridor toward the other prisoner’s cell. Ephiny cocked her head, her eyebrows knitted. Again the slave pointed at the healer’s bag, then down the hall. The woman shook her head, not understanding. “What? The jailer needs medicine?”

She didn’t get another chance. Macon appeared, unlocked the cell door to let the apprentice out.

Frustrated, she fought down the urge to punch something besides air. Her practice intensified after that, made her sweat with the force of shadow punches and kicks. The workout quickly degenerated into a parade of angry kicks at the bars of the door, making them resonate with a ring that filled the corners of the darkening cell.

A heavy club smacked the door, jolted her out of her rage. Macon stepped into view, “Cut that out, pretty, or tomorrow your guests will have to stand in the hall.”

She glowered at him until he left, slid down the wall, worn out and helpless.

She must have dozed off. A hiss woke her. She lifted her head grudgingly, tired of visitors.

A servant stood against the opposite wall of the corridor, pressed as far back from the cell door as she could get. She looked young, barely in her teens. Dark half-rings purpled under both eyes.

“I—I thought you could use this.” She tossed at the bars a bit of linen. The Leopard retrieved it, held up a tan tunic, cast the girl a baffled look. “I heard about what you did today. I just wanted to thank you.” At her blank look, the girl struggled for words. “I’m Orenia. Lieutenant Ramis—”

She crossed to the bars, reached out, waiting. The girl pressed even harder against the stone wall, clearly afraid, but with persistent coaxing stepped forward, let the gladiator brush the bruises on her face. The Leopard held up the tunic, clutched it to her chest and offered Orenia a somber nod. The girl’s dark eyes twitched in pleasure.

A sound from depths of the dungeon reminded them they were not alone. The skittish girl backed away, sped up the stairs and out of sight.

She looked back down at the tunic, working the coarse fabric between her fingers. Reverently the torn one came off. Precious water wet one corner of it, and with it she bathed as best she could, an impromptu ritual to make herself worthy of the offering.

The sound from the hall again. Quickly she finished and pulled the tunic over her head, moved to the dark hallway to listen. She heard it again, a weak moan from behind the solid door.

She flicked a fingernail against the bars of her cell. The noise was faint, perhaps too faint. A long time passed before she heard the broken groan again. She rapped her knuckles against the bars, knocking as loud as she dared without attracting the jailer’s notice.

A faint clink of metal on stone this time. She responded with a rap. Two rings of tapped metal. She rapped twice on the bars, mimicked every clink. She had nothing to offer but her response, reassurance that the prisoner was not alone. Still, such knowledge could be a lifeline when cut off from the world.

Eventually the noises stopped. She strained her ears, listening, waiting for them to resume, and for the second night of many to come she fell asleep against the bars of her cell.

## IV Cives Victriciis

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### The Conqueror's Subjects

## 23 Contumacia

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### Defiance

Late morning sun heated the hard-packed dirt of the courtyard. Servants and soldiers alike pulled scarves and cowls over their heads to ward off the growing heat, shield their eyes from the harsh Corinthian sun.

The Conqueror's pale eyes hardly noticed the glare, or the crowd. She devoured the combat in the middle of the courtyard, felt the flow of each swing, the jarring impact of each blow. The Leopard moved like water, sometimes still and patient, sometimes soft and yielding, sometimes hard and forceful. How do you attack water?

Her opponent clearly had no answer and suffered. Barely more than half his height, she remained almost unmarked. He on the other hand bore dozens of small gashes across bare arms and legs. Partway around the ring of onlookers the Conqueror caught Ephiny's scowl as another line opened up on the soldier's calf. She had a long afternoon of stitching to look forward to.

She almost felt bad for the soldier. His so-called friends, members of Lieutenant Ramis' unit, elected him as their instrument of revenge upon the gladiator. He was a passable fighter, and he stood half a head taller than any other man in his unit. When the men approached her about a grudge match, she already knew whom they would pick as their champion. Typical, that they were ever impressed with—and relied upon—size.

Size was no obstacle for the Leopard. He had the advantage of both strength and reach, true, but so did almost every other gladiator she'd ever fought. As the Conqueror knew firsthand, she

had a great deal of experience in how to counter size and strength. She danced just out of the range, let him chase her down until he spent much of his aggression, then systematically began disassembling him. There was no playing to the crowd, no humiliating or showboating. Trickle of blood flowing down his arms were shame enough, her timing and precision impressive enough. Her face showed no pleasure from this fight. The Conqueror wondered if she truly felt nothing. She could have sworn she remembered a glimmer of a smile on that hard face before the Leopard removed the lieutenant's manhood.

The soldier's comrades had complained bitterly at the "no-kill" stipulation on the match, sometimes shouted for him to finish her, send her to Tartarus. Now they mostly stood quiet, perhaps glad his life would be spared. He could hardly lift his arms, wobbled on tired legs between clashes, kept wiping his palms for a better grip on his sword, marking his tunic with long red smears.

A presence encroached on her enjoyment, pressed close behind her shoulder. Bellerophon murmured in her ear, "The emissaries from Egypt have arrived, Conqueror. They await you in the great hall."

She waved him off. "Let them wait. This is almost over."

The gladiator circled the soldier, gauging his defenses, his reserves. They'd been going at it some time, and the gladiator's arm drooped under the unfamiliar weight of the long sword. When it dipped again he swung with everything he had, one last summoning of strength to overwhelm her. Too late he recognized the feint, realized she was not so tired as she seemed when she disappeared under his swing. He might have tripped on his own momentum, but the sweep of her powerful leg made certain he dropped face-first in a cloud of dust.

She scrambled to her feet, kicked the sword from his hands, lay hers across the back of his neck.

The fool tried to get up. She kicked his arm out from under him, dropped him again, pressed harder with the flat of her sword. He tried to push up again. She shoved him back down. He tried to push up again. She threw the Conqueror a look of frustration and disgust. The Conqueror gazed back at her icily. When it became clear no intervention was forthcoming, she smashed the pommel into the back of his skull. He slumped to the dust.

There were no cheers from the audience. This was no battle won against great odds. This wasn't even a contest. Servants and officials muttered amongst themselves. Soldiers looked on with disappointment and open hostility. The gladiator moved to stand before her owner, neither dropping her sword nor kneeling, her green eyes burning with words she wouldn't say. *You could have stopped it. I didn't want to hurt him.*

The Conqueror rankled at her tiny act of rebellion, at the very rawness of emotions closer to the surface than the Leopard ever allowed, anger and resentment, as if a slave had any right to feel such things. The warrior held out her hand, took the offered sword and gestured impatiently

at the ground. The gladiator dropped to her knees, eyes staring straight ahead while the collar clicked into place.

Long fingers laced under the heavy ring in their own iron grip, knuckles pressed subtly against the taut throat, just enough to constrict breath and pulse, remind the slave of her place.

“Demetrius?”

He glanced up from the soldier, his disapproval of the whole affair cast in the deep creases of his face. “He lives.” And so low he perhaps thought no one would hear, “At least for now.”

She pitched her voice for everyone assembled to hear. “Your champion lost in a fair match. There will be no more challenges on Lieutenant Ramis’ behalf. And know this. Any attack on my property is an attack on me, and will be dealt with severely. Now get back to work.” She hauled the insolent slave to her feet, handed her off to Joxer. “Take her back to her cell.”

As the crowd parted she looked up to see the Egyptian envoy standing there. Bellerophon approached, his face apologetic. “They wanted to take in the entertainment.”

“Entertainment, huh?” She eyed them, wondered how much of that display of defiance and discipline they caught. Curse the gods, this was no time to show weakness. She plastered on her best negotiation face and headed for them. “Emissary. I hear you’ve developed a taste for Roman amusements.”

## 24 Fustii

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Chobos

“That daughter of a jackal!”

The Conqueror threw open the doors to her chambers. The nerve of Cleopatra, demanding her tribute be cut in half! Already pain gnawed at her gut. What nastiness did that little snake have in the works if her Conqueror refused?

A rumpled cot pressed itself into her awareness, empty and accusing, its occupant two days departed. Niklos’ absence left her feeling out of sorts, irritable and lonely. A hard swallow pushed down nausea, cooled her rage.

She retreated to the main chamber, shed the elaborate dinner dress and discarded it on the floor with some small satisfaction. Hardly mature, taking her frustration out on rare and expensive dresses. Didn’t change the fact it felt pretty damn good.

As she pulled a tunic over her head, the key around her neck caught her eye, stirred oddly pleasant memories. An idea struck, a possible cure for an otherwise unshakable foul mood. She threw on battle leathers and boots quickly, eager to get down to the courtyard.

Another cot grabbed her eye, fresh linens still folded on it. She half-glared at it, should have had it removed days ago. Yes, she'd have Vidalis take care of it tomorrow.

Remarkable how she could be so excited and incensed about the same person.

Late as it was, the halls of the palace were not empty. Servants cleaned up after the dinner, soldiers stood watch, but no one spared her more than a passing glance or smart salute. The Conqueror was known for night wanderings and surprise inspections. No one wanted to attract unfavorable attention.

They didn't interest her tonight. Already she could feel the knives in her abdomen dull as light feet carried her to the west courtyard.

She was halfway down darkened stairs to the dungeon when noises stopped her, faint ticks on stone, thumps on metal. She listened, let her eyes adjust to the dim torchlight bleeding from the room at the far end of the passage. The thumping came from a cell near the stairs. Boots carried her silently forward until she could make out the faint glow of pale hair. The Leopard's knuckles rapped against the bars in some sort of pattern, waiting while other noises replied from another cell further down.

The pain in her stomach roared back full force. "What in Tartarus are you up to?"

The slave bolted away from the bars, retreated into the darkest corners of the cell where her owner couldn't see her. But she could hear rapid breathing, feet shifting nervously on straw.

A head poked into view, the sleepy Macon pushing a torch into the hall. "Conqueror?" He hurried down the hall, fishing a key from his belt.

Orange brightness filled the cell, revealed the gladiator's guilty stance. For an angry moment the Conqueror wanted to forget the whole thing, leave her in the cell to rot. The jailer held up the key uncertainly. Tightly she nodded, stood aside as the cell door opened. "Let's go."

The Leopard stepped out of the cell stiffly, almost flinching when she passed. Clearly she expected to be hit. The Conqueror wouldn't give her the satisfaction...yet. She pushed her toward the stairs.

They crossed the courtyard without saying anything, ended up in the armory by the barracks. "Choose." She gestured to the rack of practice weapons. The gladiator eyed her distrustfully. "Choose!"

Reluctantly she stepped up, her fingers brushing across dozens of swords, spears, and clubs. Her hands closed around the familiar hilts of two gladii, almost pulled them from the rack before

they froze, took out a battered pair of chobos instead, staring at the fighting sticks in shock. She turned to the Conqueror, her disbelief apparent.

The Conqueror noted her choice with interest. Farm girl indeed. “You like those? They belonged to one of my slaves.”

She looked down at the sticks in her hands, gave them an experimental swing. Actually, she spun the weapons with practiced skill. Amused at the gladiator’s slip, the Conqueror selected a long wooden sword, moved to face her opponent.

The Leopard thumbed the grips of the weapons, eyes gone vacant with memory. Slowly they fixed on the Conqueror, cold and hard, as she padded out toward the center of the courtyard to take a ready stance.

Sword crashed into chobo. The Leopard let the taller woman set the pace and intensity of the match, backing out of reach when the attacks came too hard or fast. Every time the Conqueror tried to maneuver her into a corner the slippery bitch somehow managed to escape the tightening noose. As in their previous encounters the Leopard did not strike, merely guarded and gave ground even when the Conqueror deliberately left openings in her defense.

“Attack!”

The Leopard refused.

“Attack, damn you!”

“Why?” she growled. “Need an excuse to kill me?”

“You think I need an excuse? I’ll kill you when it pleases me and nothing more.”

Wood cracked against wood, hard and fast, but the gladiator’s defense was nearly impenetrable. The Conqueror would definitely have to open her up.

“You know, she’s still around. The owner of those weapons. I don’t know why I let her live. I suppose she amuses me, too.”

She grinned when the gladiator’s eyes narrowed to angry slits. “Where is she?”

“Oh, I think you already know.”

The Leopard frowned in thought, suddenly gaped in comprehension.

A smack to the temple dropped her. Woozily the gladiator staggered to her feet, eyes glassy and unfocused, chobos blindly blocking strikes, stumbling back when a kick doubled her over. The Conqueror moved in to finish her, but the woman dropped out of sight; the next moment she

thudded to the dirt, her legs kicked out from beneath her. The Leopard sprinted across the courtyard toward the dungeon.

The Conqueror swore, charged after her. The gladiator careened off the walls of the stairwell, still reeling from the blow, but she managed to stay well out of reach as they raced past a dozen cell doors lining the underground passage. Her prey burst into the torchlit room at the end and skidded to a stop, staring. Seeing her chance she launched, but the slave bolted aside. By the time she rolled to her feet, Macon lay unconscious on the floor, his keys in the Leopard's hand.

The Conqueror lunged, blocked the doorway to the passage of cells. For the second time that night, she fairly vibrated with fury. "Put those keys down now."

Her tone would have stopped any sane person in their tracks. By the fire in her eyes, the Leopard was too enraged to qualify. "I have to see her."

"Is it worth your life?"

Her eyes darted around the dimly lit room at the heart of the dungeon, at the chains and knives and whips hanging on the walls. Though she paled, the instruments only incensed her. "What have you done to her?"

The Conqueror straightened to look down at the mutinous slave. "Nothing more than an enemy of the state deserves. Give me those keys."

Her voice quavered, low but vehement. "No one deserves this place."

"Give up those keys and I may spare your life, Amazon."

The sickly green glow in those eyes sputtered.

"Chobos are Amazon weapons. Any Amazon who refuses to renounce the Nation or her Queen faces crucifixion."

The Leopard snorted bitterly. "I'm no Amazon. Their Queen was Caesar's prisoner, his star gladiator. She taught me how to fight. She did such a fine job that I killed her."

The Conqueror searched her face for truth. "In the arena?"

A sneer of disgust. "Caesar wouldn't allow her that honor. I murdered her for his own private amusement."

In her distraction Xena saw pain and half-truth. And opportunity. She lunged, almost snatched the keys. Instead she caught a stick across the temple, bounced off the wall before crashing into darkness.



## 25 Centonarius

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Patchwork

The Leopard stared wide-eyed at the unconscious woman at her feet. The Conqueror came in so fast, she just reacted—

When her owner woke, she was good as dead.

Heart pounding, her unfocused vision floated to the room beyond, full of instruments best used to inflict pain and suffering. In a daze she stepped over the limp form, plucked a wicked blade from a stand next to the giant stained table, dropped down beside the Conqueror. It would be quick. The blade found the delicate neck, bounced against the thump of a fierce heart, opened a thin split along ivory skin.

She hovered there, ready, her breathing shallow. But her hand didn't move. It twitched and stilled, caught in a war between forces she didn't understand. Her jaw clenched, ground teeth together until she snarled in frustration, jabbing the knife into the dirt.

With a deep breath she rose, slid the key into the heavy lock and turned it, pulled the iron door open. Darkness. She retrieved a torch, followed it into the cell.

Orange light spilled into the bare cell, rank with the stench of human waste. Against the far wall, arms hanging from shackles, sat the remnants of a woman grown thin with starvation, skin drawn tight around bones and little else. Translucent alabaster flesh formed the cloth upon which some dark artist scored and sewed a quilt of cuts and stitches. Nearly every square inch of skin criss-crossed with long ragged scars, some several moons healed, some bright and livid with the passing of mere days.

The Leopard scarcely breathed, tentatively crossed the cell. She held the torch closer, her other hand brushing back a long curtain of dirty copper curls.

The head lifted, dull sunken eyes peering out from a ruined patchwork face that turned her stomach.

Rough hands grabbed her from behind. She spun with a punch, stopped it within hairs of Scar's face. Her fist hovered there, cocked, hungry to hit someone, anyone who would do that to a person. Or allow it to happen. He glanced passed her at the prisoner, hustled her out of the tiny room, white knuckled fingers dug in to her bicep.

More soldiers hauled the Conqueror to her feet, steadied her as she shook her head. She rubbed her temple, took in the open door, the gladiator. Her face twisted in rage and she snatched up a sword, raised it to strike the mulish head from the Leopard's shoulders. She didn't flinch, didn't block, didn't move. Contempt burned in her eyes for the woman who would order such torture, as gruesome as anything Caesar ever meted out. She raised her chin, willing her owner to swing.

The Conqueror hesitated, her eyes drawn to the woman chained to the wall. A slight frown formed on her face as she stepped in, brought a torch closer to see. Her scowl deepened.

“Who did this?”

Her voice cut through all sounds. No one offered an answer. She stepped back into the hall, glowered at the soldiers, the unconscious jailer. Piercing blue eyes settled on the Leopard. She stared back, surprised at the Conqueror’s anger. That alone dampened her own righteous rage, left a muddle of emotions far more complicated and confusing.

The cell door swung shut, cutting off her view. “Lock that man up,” Xena growled, gesturing at Macon.

Scar cleared his throat. “Conqueror, should I summon a healer?”

She glared at him. Nervously he gestured vaguely at his own neck, nodded to hers. A hand went to her throat, found the thin crusted cut. Her gaze dropped to the blade on the ground, the Leopard. A furious heat flushed her face. In one smooth motion she snatched up the chobos and keys and swept out of the dungeon. “Bring her.”

Plenty of eyes followed them as they made their way through the palace. They shrank from the Conqueror’s tempest, threw pitying looks at the slave dragged behind her. Eventually they ended up in a hallway on the upper floor in front of a set of heavy double doors. “You’re dismissed,” her owner barked over her shoulder, taking the slave by the arm and pushing her through the doors.

The royal bedchambers. She’d lost count of the days since her first and last disastrous visit. A luxurious bath, unexpected frankness between them, sudden hostility...the cell seemed far less surreal.

The Conqueror slammed the doors shut behind them and stood there, her back to the slave, arms bunching, hands gripping the chobos so hard she could swear she heard wood creak. She flung them past the Leopard to clatter against the far wall. “You infuriate me!”

The gladiator winced, stood carefully still.

One long finger stabbed back the way they’d come. “You saw who did that, didn’t you? That’s how you knew she was there, who she is!”

She shook her head, kept her thoughts and feelings under tight rein. She almost even managed to still the tremor in her voice. “I don’t know who she is. I’ve never seen her before. And truthfully, I thought you did it.”

Blue eyes narrowed dangerously. “Think again.”

Her fury sounded genuine. She searched Xena's face, hunting for any hint of deception, found none, grasped at the threads of her unraveling anger. "Whoever it is, the jailer lets them in and out. Ask him."

"I can't. You clobbered him."

The gladiator met the glare stubbornly, neither sorry nor apologetic. They stared each other down, locked in a battle of wills and doubts.

The Conqueror sighed and shook her head. "Gods defend us. When the Amazons find out, I'll be neck deep in rebels and assassins."

The Leopard stared at her a few moments. Had the Destroyer of Nations just called a truce? Uncertainly she clung to her temper, ready to meet that sharp gaze again, but the Conqueror turned away and headed into one of the antechambers, sloughing off her battle leathers. She stared at the retreating back in amazement, finally allowed her shoulders to relax.

Alone in the middle of the large bedchamber, a shiver crept up her spine. For the first time in nearly five years, she stood in a place without bars or chains or watching eyes. She glanced nervously around the massive bedchamber. The Leopard, formidable adversary in the arena, slave in the clammers of some of the most powerful rulers of the known world, suddenly small, naked, and...afraid. When had the trappings of her captivity become comforting? Without them she felt exposed, vulnerable. This was what she waited for, wasn't it? The opportunity to escape? Outside the double doors stood a single guard, a series of uncomplicated and lightly-guarded hallways to...where? Beyond the courtyard she knew nothing of this place. Still, it was a chance. More chance than she'd had in years.

"Think you'd make it?"

She flinched. The Destroyer leaned her head out of the antechamber. Could she read minds as well? The slave struggled to mask her guilt. "Make it where?"

"Out of here? Do you think you could escape the palace?"

The gladiator's vision fairly pulsed with the thoughts pounding through her head. She swallowed hard. "No." The Conqueror arched a disbelieving eyebrow. She shifted uncomfortably at the lie, finally squared her shoulders. "Maybe."

"What's stopping you?"

She struggled to suppress roiling emotions. Gods, how she wanted to retreat to that fog where the Leopard thought nothing, felt nothing. Since breaking her silence, that purity, that crystal clarity of acting and reacting eluded her. She opened her mouth several times, conflicted. "Not sure. You, I suppose." She flushed with color at the admission, fervently looked away. Numb feet carried her across the room to the window, a narrow thing that viewed a slice of the palace, the practice courtyard below. Had the Conqueror stood at this window, watched the slave sit in

the shade of the loggia and run through her exercises and drills? Why not? Hadn't she appeared out of nowhere just in time to stop Ramis' men from beating her to death? True or not, it brought her some comfort to believe the Conqueror kept an eye on her.

She looked over her shoulder, wondering if the Conqueror watched her now. An empty cot just inside the main doors caught her eye. "Your servant, the boy...is he better?"

Rustling in the antechamber grew still. "I sent him home."

"Where's home?"

"Mount Nestos."

That name jarred a memory. A girl she used to sit in the rafters of the barn, staring out across Poteidaian fields and rolling hills at distant grey peaks to the north, capped brilliant white with an early fall snow. A lump of longing strangled her; she cleared it from her throat. "That's days away. When will he be back?"

"Weeks away, actually. And never."

Perhaps it was the way her voice faltered as she said it. A coldness suddenly sank into the gladiator's bones.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't." A false lightness colored a voice thick with emotion. "He's not dead. His father Niklio is an old hermit healer, best I've ever known. If there's anyone who can help Niklos, it's him. And even if Niklos does heal, he's never coming back. It's too dangerous here for someone like him."

Someone like him. She wondered how the Conqueror classified people like him. Young? Innocent? Defenseless? Undamaged?

Her foot bumped a discarded chobo. She picked it up, turned it over in her hand. It looked almost identical to the pair she learned with, the carvings on the shaft depicting a bare-breasted archer taking aim at a stag in the forest. "Who was that prisoner?"

"Queen Terreis. I caught her in a raid on the northern territories. Her tribe's been a pain in my backside, but so long as I have her, the Amazons behave. Now this." She stepped out of the dressing antechamber, her favorite old robes shrouding the long thin figure. She rolled her neck and shoulders, already bearing the weight of new troubles.

Gabrielle thought a long moment. "You didn't do it. Why don't you bring the culprit to justice, set the queen free? Or at least let her live as a slave. Let the Amazons see you set things right."

The warlord sighed. "It doesn't work like that." She disappeared into the bath chamber.

Left alone, the silence became unnerving. Her thoughts kept drifting to the Conqueror standing over her, sword raised. She drew in a long breath, her voice low with uncertainty. "I was sure you were going to kill me tonight."

The Conqueror grunted, returned holding a cloth to her bleeding brow. "Nearly did. But then we wouldn't be having this pleasant conversation." Troubling thoughts made the Conqueror shake her head, pour a goblet of wine to wash them away. Absently she scratched her throat, fingered the cut across her neck. "You could have killed me too. Why didn't you?"

The Leopard thought about that. "Maybe I wanted to talk to you, too."

The Conqueror snorted. It lacked intimidation, turned inward. Another swig of wine gave voice to her thoughts. "Why? You don't talk to anyone else. Why me?"

No answer presented itself. She stood there, her thoughts jumbled, wrestling for dominance. Reflexively she grabbed the damp rag thrown her way as the dark-haired woman padded over to the table of food. The bloodstained cloth was wet and cool on the lump at her temple, brought instant relief. Her owner brought the plate of treats to the giant bed, gestured for the Leopard to sit. She didn't. The Conqueror's friendly demeanor cooled a bit. "You sure as Hades never talked to Caesar."

Bile rose in her throat, laced her words. "It was Caesar who taught me the value of silence." She turned to a clean spot on the cloth, pressed it against her head while she considered. "That—the first night we met, you...saw me. You didn't underestimate me because I was small, or young, or a woman, or a slave, or even a gladiator. You respected my skills and fought accordingly. So I respect you. And when you realized I was hurt, you could have pressed the advantage but you didn't. You helped me, fixed my shoulder, showed fairness and mercy. So I help you. And then you said you wanted us to fight again when I was healed, as equals. So I treat you as an equal. And when we did fight again, you saved me from my owner. So I protect you."

"Equals, huh?"

The gladiator shifted her feet, fought to keep her nerve under the withering stare. "Yes. Equals. Not in station, I know that, but as mortals under Olympus. I think you understand me like no one else can. And I understand you. We're fighters. We act; we don't watch. We look for trouble; we don't run from trouble. You're the first person in almost four years I actually want to talk to."

"I'm touched," the warrior snipped. But she seemed at a loss for any comment more cutting. The silence stretched on. The gladiator took a deep breath.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"I won't promise an answer."

She eased herself to the floor beside the bed, leaned her head against the pad, the rag almost forgotten in her hand. “Why did you destroy Poteidaia?”

The Conqueror’s face grew still and stark. She nodded. “I’ll answer, if you tell me this first. Why did you leave it?”

A familiar cold settled in her stomach, verging on the brink of violent illness. She took a deep breath, steeling herself for a plunge into icy waters. “I...killed one of your officers.” She expected an outburst, an interrogation, but the Conqueror said nothing, waited expectantly. “A watch captain at the garrison named Callisto. She was temperamental and cruel.” Again she looked to the Conqueror for a response, met unreadable eyes, forged ahead. “Everyone feared her, even her own troops. Attracting her attention was a sure way to meet a horrible fate. Like my sister.” A lump closed her throat; she swallowed several times before she could clear it to speak. “She had a beautiful way of saying what was on her mind.”

“Like you?”

The question startled her. She peered up at the face, trying to read Xena’s thoughts. “Yeah, I could be opinionated, but I wasn’t the one who drew Callisto’s eye.” Her shuddering voice betrayed her. “I came home from the fields one day to find her tied to the well, a hole where her tongue used to be. We had to do something. Quietly I began to talk to the townsfolk, encourage them to—”

“Revolt?”

Eyebrows knitted. “Write a letter of petition. I’d heard all sorts of stories about you. That in spite your harshness, you were fair. I thought if you knew what your officers were doing, you would put a stop to it. I would write it, get the townspeople to sign it—”

The cascade of words dried up in her throat. When she struggled to start again, the Conqueror pressed her goblet of wine into her hand. She peered into its plum depths, gave in with a long gulp. Absent was the usual bite of vinegar, coating her throat instead with cloying sweetness. She licked her lips, found the goblet more than half drained. Embarrassed, she refilled it before continuing.

“Most of the villagers refused to rally behind a peasant woman. Only after my husband put his name on the letter would they add their marks. He supported the letter, of course. The more people looked to him as the writer of that letter, the more he began to talk like it was his idea. I didn’t mind, really. It wasn’t about taking credit, so I didn’t argue. When Callisto found out about the letter—”

“She killed him.” That the Conqueror said it so matter-of-factly reopened old aches long thought to be healed. Brutally she clamped down on her feelings, cauterized them with other memories.

“I confronted her alone outside the camp that night. I wish I could say we met by luck or fate, that I hadn’t been waiting in the woods when she came out to the latrines to relieve herself. That I didn’t mean to have a knife in my hand. That I planned to meet her face to face as a citizen and just talk to her, ask her to explain how she could so casually end a life. But the truth is, I was there, and armed, and when the Fates brought her to me, I couldn’t convince myself that talk would change or stop her.”

She trailed off again, her mind on the stench, the taunting laughter, the wet blade.

“Was she your first?”

Her head bobbed dully. “I told my parents what I’d done, planned to turn myself in, but they convinced me that your soldiers would execute the entire family for my crime, after what happened to my sister. We left in darkness, told no one where we were going. But everything was different after that. Their looks, their silence. I left the next summer, came back to Poteidaea. It was burned to the ground. Crucifixes dotted the isthmus from shore to shore. Every cow, sheep, pig, goat, and chicken lay slaughtered, every building reduced to ash. No survivors.” Her stomach convulsed at the memory.

The soft voice intruded. “Why do you think I came to Poteidaia?”

A shrug. “I’ve asked myself that so many times. I told myself something must have happened over the winter. Some say the town couldn’t pay its yearly grain tithe. Or maybe it was another of your officers running amok. Or it could have been an accident.”

Blue eyes bored through her. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t know. I was afraid...it was a warning to those who defy your rule.”

The Conqueror reclined against the pillows, propped a long arm carefully on her robed knee. “Yes.”

The gladiator went still, the knot in her throat suddenly too big to swallow. Fingers tightened around the weapon in her hand, threatened to snap either wood or bone.

The Conqueror studied her with half-lidded eyes. “What are you waiting for? This is why you’re here, isn’t it? For revenge?”

Her head swam with emotion. “What?”

“Why Caesar sent you. To kill me. To avenge Poteidaia. What are you waiting for? You got your answer. I ordered the destruction of your home, the execution of your friends. Now it should be easy.”

The gladiator shook her head, thoroughly shaken. “I—I didn’t—why?”

“Does it matter? They’re dead. Now’s your chance.”

“It matters!”

“Did it matter why Callisto killed your husband? You took your vengeance on her.”

“And paid for it with my soul!” She struggled to lower her voice. “When I took her life, a part of me died and a part of her took hold. I’ve killed so many since then, too many to count. I told myself I killed her for some greater good, that I was doing it to save Poteidaia. Now you’re saying their deaths are my doing, too. So yes, it matters. Was it worth slaughtering an entire village just to teach me a lesson?”

She held up a hand, silencing the trembling gladiator. “A warlord named Draco appeared over the winter, made a name for himself raiding villages in the valleys west of Poteidaia. My scouts reported men flocking to his camps in the hundreds, even thousands. With enough food and money he could march on Amphipolis. I could have pulled the First Army from Macedonia, chased him around Greece until I hemmed him in and forced a battle. Of course, dozens of villages would be caught in his rampage, never mind the sheer stupidity of leaving Greece’s northern borders undefended against Rome or the Gauls. Or...I could remove the food and money and strike fear in the hearts of his men in one blow. After that one night of fire and crucifixion, Draco’s army evaporated. That one act of brutality bought years of peace and prosperity. It had nothing to do with you. Their murders are not yours to bear. They’re mine.”

She stood speechless, struck by the grim conviction of her owner, slowly sank down to the floor, considering her explanation. Her confession. Eyes fell to the chobo in her hand. “I almost took a swing at you. You wanted me to. For them.”

Xena looked away.

She thought about that, about this hidden side to her owner, the one that admitted feeling guilt for the suffering she’d caused. And few people in Greece had caused as much suffering as the Conqueror. She took a deep breath, met pinched eyes with an understanding that ran deeper than most could fathom. “Don’t look to me to punish you for your crimes. You’ll just have to do your best to set things right, starting tomorrow with Queen Terreis.”

## 26 Serva Corpa

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**Body Slave**

She awoke as the sky grew light, startled she’d slept so deeply. Instantly her eyes darted to the cot near the fireplace.



Empty. She'd jumped to her feet before noticing the lump underneath, the tangle of golden hair buried under a pillow. The woman still slept, her knees pulled up tight against her chest, long from waking by the sound of her breathing. She'd fallen asleep leaning against the bed; it had taken some convincing to get her to go lay on the cot. The night dragged on with the sound of her tossing until the Conqueror dozed off. Either the Leopard had been very quiet when she moved, or her presence hadn't set off the warrior's cautious senses. She'd have to remember that.

She considered waking her, but it was early still, and she needed to think. She threw on a practice tunic and headed up, sword in hand, to the roof. From there she could see much of the palace and had an unobstructed view of the unborn sunrise. And she could practice away from prying eyes.

Apollo's chariot raced into the sky when she returned to her chambers. She crept in quietly to crouch low by the cot, reached out to touch a shoulder, thought better of it. "Parda?" When she didn't stir, the woman tried again, louder. "Gabrielle?"

The slave jerked, whipped around. Quickly she clambered to her feet, struggling to blink the sleep out of her eyes.

"I need you to attend to me today. Vidalis is sending water boys to heat the bath and bring up breakfast. I need to get cleaned up. So do you. Remember your tasting duties, stay close, do as I command without question. Above all, listen. Will you do that?"

Strange that she turned the order into a question. Stranger still that the willful thing nodded without hesitation. Had to be the sleepiness dulling her contrariness. Long arms peeled the sweat-soaked tunic from her frame, tossed it to the body slave as she crossed the spacious chamber.

As she drew the threadbare robe over broad shoulders she caught the Leopard studying her, felt a strange flutter of nervousness. Did those young eyes see too many scars, a relief map of the warrior's past mistakes? Or did they see too few, think she let others do her fighting for her? Was her physique going soft with age and time away from the battlefield? When she glanced up again, the expression was carefully tucked away. Her moment of self-consciousness turned raw. Gods, what idiocy, to care what a lowly slave thought of the Destroyer of Nations.

Yet her thoughts kept returning to that look, and she forced herself to admit that she did care. Not because the woman had any say in the Conqueror's life, but because she spoke last night with such honesty about that life, and what it meant to her.

Foolishness, all her talk of respect and honor and equality. Words a younger Xena once spouted when she led the defense of Amphipolis. Words that convinced her to trust a handsome young Caesar. Words she eradicated from her soul to make her name feared far to the east and north. Words she used to gain trust, land, and power once in Greece again. Words that ate at her as she grew older, looking back on a life long on action and short on meaning.

The slave followed her into the antechamber, stopped at the sight of innumerable silks, linens, and leathers neatly arranged on shelves and hooks. Embarrassed, she rifled through her clothes quickly. "It's Vidalis. He thinks the ruler of Greece should have an expansive wardrobe." She pulled out a long white dress trimmed in gold, held it up to her lean frame. "A gift from the land of the Pharaohs. It'll do."

A quiet knock at the door. She looked to her slave, eyes flicking that way expectantly, watched her hurry out of sight. Anxiously she listened for trouble. The gladiator seemed to know nothing but fighting, certainly couldn't manage the basic art of conversation. Her interactions with the rest of the Conqueror's subjects always seemed to end in a body count.

When the first water boy hurried in, she exhaled, relieved.

A tray of food came next. Without prompting the slave examined the contents, carefully ate a bit of each one and sipped the wine, her eyes on the Conqueror, before bringing over a small bowl of bread and berries and a goblet of wine. A small smile crept onto Xena's lips.

"Ah, Conqueror! And your new body slave. How nice."

Vidalis's tone spoke volumes otherwise as he flitted between scurrying boys, his girth hardly slowing him down. His head tilted toward the empty cot in the entry way. "I'll have that removed today. Heartbreaking, losing Niklos. 'Tis a shame he won't be attending you during this most important visit." The slave didn't miss the barb, bristled. He didn't spare her a glance. "I brought the articles you ordered." He produced a long Roman-style white tunic, held it up against the fair slave. "I'd have to see it on her mannish frame to gauge the fit—"

The warrior took it from him before the wildcat decided to remove his hands. "I'm sure it's fine. And be careful what you call her frame. It's not so different from mine."

"My apologies, Conqueror. She is uncommonly healthy, from strong peasant stock." He proffered a golden corded belt and gold shoulder clasps for the long tunic; the warrior reached more curiously for the polished gold collar. Under examination the ring was relatively thin and light, more for decoration than practicality in spite of the half-ring anchor in the front and the locking clasp in the back. More importantly it was loose and smooth, would not cut or chafe the delicate skin it was forged for. She smiled at the headservant. "This is exquisite."

He beamed at the rare compliment. "Persian design. Clean, elegant, functional. I see the bearer doesn't appreciate your kindness."

With the man's upturned look of disdain she realized the Leopard had backed away from them both. Well, she expected a fight. She wouldn't be disappointed. "Thank you, Vidalis. The key?"

He held up a dark leather cord upon which the tiny golden key dangled and placed it in her palm. He noted the fine Egyptian robes she held. "May I suggest your snake armlet with that? I can help you with the gold-braided wig before your audience today."

“Fine,” she called over her shoulder, avoiding a waterboy as she made her way toward the bath. “Tell them that’s enough water.”

“As you wish. The delegates will be in the hall within a candlemark. Dinner will be roast duck served in your private courtyard. May I be of any other service to you, Conqueror?”

“Yes. Send up Captain Bellerophon in half a candlemark, not before. I don’t want to be disturbed during my bath. That will be all.”

“By your will.” He bowed deeply as he backed out of the room, pulling the double doors shut behind him.

The gladiator stood rooted, glaring after the man. The Conqueror chuckled. “He’s very good at what he does, if a little odd. You get used to it. Come, help me bathe.”

The bath was business, not pleasure, a quick thorough cleansing without conversation. The gladiator helped her dry off and don the revealing dress. To her credit the slave kept her wits about her this time, didn’t let her eyes wander over the curves of her owner...much. Once the Conqueror was dressed she sent the slave to scrub herself clean while she added the finishing touches.

She handed the fighter a cloth to dry herself as she stepped out, waited until she was done to approach her back. Long nimble fingers gently applied the sharp-smelling salve—the same one she’d used on the gladiator the first day on the boat—to old and new scars lacing her shoulders and back and arms. “Badges of pride aside, this will fade those marks with regular use. I keep it on the stand here. Use it once a day and after every bath.” As she set the clay pot back down, her fingers brushed the slave’s tan tunic before scooping up the new white one. “Where did you get that?”

The striped shoulders stiffened. “A gift.”

That there was more to the story was clear. That the gladiator didn’t want to explain was also clear. The Conqueror didn’t like secrets. She held back her questions, decided to wait and see if her slave would ever offer a better answer.

With a little help she slipped the white tunic over the golden head, pinned the clasps on the shoulders. It occurred to her how lovely it would look to release one of those clasps, bare one small firm breast for her guests to admire, though the thought of any of them taking an interest in her more womanly features stirred the acid in her stomach. *Everything of yours is mine.*

She tore her eyes away before the gladiator saw the look, focused her gaze on the golden cord she tied around the firm abdomen until the vision passed. Since her last campaign more than a year ago, her infamous urges had gone curiously missing. That they should rear up now, with this ruined piece of flesh and soul to break the fast, struck her as cruel irony. Those conquered in the bedchamber were rarely much fun afterwards, too broken or frightened or hateful to let

themselves feel pleasure again. That kind of unpredictability coupled with this one's skills...no, she'd find another outlet for her libido.

When she held up the collar, the Leopard stepped back. Refusal sparked instant anger. "Come here."

Green eyes flared. "Why? I didn't run last night."

The Conqueror had to remind herself the slave had worn no collar since her last fight. How to make her understand? "It's a symbol. It shows the world you belong to me, that you are under my protection. A wrong against you is a wrong against me. Every slave in this palace wears a collar. Do you think it so distasteful to be owned by me?"

"To be owned at all, yes."

"And yet here you are. But I'm not unreasonable. I offer you a choice. This, or the heavy restraints you wore into Corinth. I warn you, you'll still be expected to perform your tasks either way."

She watched her words burrow into that bright mind, stubbornness warring with practicality. The slave thrust her chin up in a gesture of willful pride, let her lock the ring around her neck.

"Thank you." She genuinely appreciated the gladiator's assent, pressured though it was. In truth, she looked forward to having her near all day.

A knock on the door dampened her enthusiasm.

"If it's Captain Bellerophon, see him in. And Parda?"

The slave turned, halfway to the door.

"Let's try to get through today without bloodshed, shall we?"

The Leopard's mouth drew into a thin line.

When she returned from the entryway, the captain followed. The black eyes were almost gone, but judging by the stiff face, he held a low opinion of the slave's new duties.

"You sent for me, Conqueror?"

"Macon is under arrest."

"The jailer? What has he done?" Immediately he glanced at the gladiator suspiciously.

"Send a detail to relieve the guards I left there last night, and find me a new jailer. And let me know when Macon wakes up. I want to ask him a few questions."

Eyes darted between owner and slave. His mouth opened as if to speak, then closed abruptly to inhale through perfect teeth. “By your will.” He bowed crisply and left.

The Conqueror exhaled. Until that man got over his mistrust of the gladiator, she would keep her very close indeed. Out of the corner of her eye she caught the Leopard staring at the door, her face shadowed by some dark instinct that made her green eyes practically glow with heat. Even in a simple Roman tunic, the woman radiated predator.

“You look—” *stunning*, her mind interjected, but she caught herself. “Intimidating, as a Roman gladiator should.”

The Leopard’s jaw clenched, her distaste plain. She smiled apologetically. “I know. You’re Greek. Just pretend, will you? The delegates we meet today are very fond of Romans.”

## 27 Tributum Cleopatrae

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### Cleopatra’s Tribute

She stood some distance from the Conqueror, alone and unobtrusive against a wall next to a silver amphora of wine. Xena and her guests reclined lazily on long dining couches, plucking from a low table fresh fruits, nuts, savory and sweet breads, cheeses, fish, quail, boar, and venison. Given the rare delicacies spread around the table, an onlooker might have thought the Conqueror entertained Caesar himself, not a lowly delegate from Egypt.

She dined and conversed with the Egyptians casually, her plate almost untouched. When the slave thought about it, the Conqueror always had such morsels available to her, though she hardly ever partook of them. Both times she’d been to the Conqueror’s chambers, her owner prepared a plate of food only to have her taster eat more than she did. How much fruit and cheese and dried meat spoiled on those sumptuous trays?

The snap of fingers jerked her mind back to the table, to the feast and those who dined upon it. The Conqueror held out her hand, her empty goblet waiting expectantly. As she obediently filled the goblet, the emissary at the far end of the table interrupted his own near constant chatter. “Ah, excellent. I would indulge in more of your wonderful nectar as well.”

The Leopard glanced at her owner. At the nod she walked around the table to refill his drink.

His eyes doubled back to her for a second glance, flicked down and up her body like the twin forks of an asp’s tongue. Her skin crawled, flushed hot as if burned. He looked away, but not before a smile crept onto his olive features. She returned to her station but couldn’t help watching out of the corner of her eye, wary of his interest.

Apparently the Conqueror noticed too, for when he finished his tale, she edged forward and grinned conspiratorially. "You like her, Amun."

It was more statement than question. He paused only a heartbeat, smiled broadly. "She is indeed a vision. That pale hair is unusual, surely passed down from great Alexander himself. Personally I find her a bit...gamey...for my tastes. But I accept your offer, if it is indeed an offer."

The grin turned to ice on her lips. "It's not. I'm sure you'll find other companionship more to your liking. Her skills lie...elsewhere." The Conqueror's gaze drifted from the emissary to the slave, and the Leopard could swear she saw some heat flicker beneath those hard blue eyes.

At the silent exchange Amun's eyebrows rose in pleasant surprise. "By Horus, this isn't the same slave we saw brawling in the courtyard, is it? She looks so civilized when she's clean. Well trained, too."

The Conqueror fixed him with a dangerous stare.

He brightened. "Which reminds me. We bring from noble Cleopatra a gift, a symbol of her gratitude as your humble servant."

At a glance, the military officer seated beside him rose from the table to open the dining hall doors. Just beyond waited two Egyptian guards, and between them a figure shrouded all in white.

"Conqueror. I give you Khepri."

The figure came to life, raised the white veil to reveal a beautiful young face, a firm young body that began to sway in time with a broken and exotic rhythm.

Slow sinuous movement stole the gladiator's gaze, held her captive as each limb shifted with a will of its own. The boneless gyrations struck her as unnatural, inhuman, primal. Every part of her moved in different directions at once. Everything but her eyes, locked on the woman at the head of the banquet.

She peered at her owner, noted the lazy posture, the shuddered eyes, the subtle frown. Her taut body exuded displeasure at this turn of events. No, not exactly displeasure. The Conqueror would not bother concealing anger. Her scowl masked something else, some other trouble churning within.

A wave of nausea wrenched at the gladiator's stomach, the same sensation that filled her when Amun's eyes raked over her. Now she could see the quick shallow rise and fall of the Conqueror's chest, the slightly parted lips, the hand gripping the armrest just a little too hard. She knew that look from others, just never from the Conqueror.

Hunger.

Slowly the dancer closed the distance between them. She writhed sensuously, every arch of her back an offering of her breasts, every turn out of the leg and thrust of the hip an invitation to explore deeper mysteries. Even her arms moved as if guided by an invisible lover, caressing without touching, reaching and drawing in to her tantalizing bronze skin.

The Conqueror had eyes for no one else.

Warily the slave took small steps toward the warrior, her eyes upon the Egyptians in the room. Even they seemed entranced by the dancer, all but two. The military advisor studied the Conqueror. The delegate Amun studied her.

She looked away quickly, unsure what the Conqueror's punishment would be for looking one of her guests in the eye. But old defiance reared up, that he should stare at her as if she already lay in his bed. She met his gaze again, made clear by her expression that he would not find her companionship pleasurable.

He grinned. Not the charming easy smile that he smeared on for the Conqueror, but a gash of teeth and gums stretched wide and ravenous.

Even without taking her eyes from him, she took in the silver platter of duck, the burning candelabras, the jade dragon centerpiece, the polished serving spoon, all perfectly acceptable for caving in his skull.

Something shifted in the air. The Conqueror hadn't moved, but Captain Bellerophon leaned over her shoulder to whisper in her ear, and the expression on her face shifted from shadowy desire to frozen fury. The dancer stood within two paces of her and closing, arching back to close in for a touch—

The Conqueror held up a hand. The drumming died. The performer paused, her face upside down before the Conqueror, her whole being quivering slightly with hard breaths.

"I accept my servant Cleopatra's gift. Vidalis, escort her to the slave quarters." With a flick of her wrist she dismissed the woman, turned back to the table without another thought. "Emissary, an excellent conclusion to dinner. Shall we retire during the heat of the day? We'll speak again later; I'm eager to hear more of Cleopatra's wish to renegotiate Egypt's tribute."

She rose without waiting for a reply, swept past the surprised Khepri and Vidalis and out of the hall, the captain close behind.

The slave stood frozen, unsure. Was she meant to follow and serve, or stay to watch and listen? She looked to Vidalis for direction, but he was fascinated by the Egyptian dancer who stared hungrily after the retreating back of the Conqueror. As he led her away Khepri locked eyes with her, hostile challenge leaving her bewildered.

A murmur reached her ears, muttering between soldier and diplomat in the foreign tongue they dared not speak before the Conqueror. Her stare settled on them, unable to tear her attention away from the condescending smiles and quiet chuckles.

Again the emissary met her gaze, this time far more inviting, gesturing for her to come nearer as some long-lost uncle would a skittish child. When she didn't move he raised his goblet, waiting patiently. Only slowly did her feet move, not sure how her owner would have her respond. She'd already been commanded to fill the man's cup once; cautiously she did so again.

He pitched his voice low enough that only she and the commander beside him could hear, his Latin overly enunciated. "Your old *dominus* is glad you fare well. However, he would have you remember your obligations."

Her heart stopped.

Many moments seemed to pass before she felt its heavy thump push sluggish fluid through her veins. Many more before she felt her lungs hitch, aching for breath. Dimly she became aware of his hand on her arm, jerked it free as if burned. Sour essence of grape sloshed out, stained her white tunic the color of fresh angry bruise.

"His eyes are upon you, Parda, here more than ever. Strike sure and true. Someone eagerly awaits your return."

She faltered back, uneasy at the smiling ghost before her. Wide eyes tore themselves away, raked the room. Other than the delegation, only a servant watched from the kitchen. Had the woman heard? Had she seen?

Numb fingers set the amphora on the table before it slipped out of their grasp. She turned, willing one foot in front of the other, wherever they might take her away from his shallow smile.

## 28 Narratus Carcerarii

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### The Jailor's Tale

The Conqueror blazed across the courtyard, her long strides forcing Bellerophon to jog to keep up. His expression betrayed him; his life hung in the balance of the next few moments.

He followed her into the prison, directly to the open cell door where two soldiers stood like pillars of salt. Roughly she shoved one aside, her lips curled in disgust at what she knew awaited her.

Macon lay slumped against the bars of the cell, grey and still. She crouched down beside the corpse, turned his chin to examine the bloody lump on the side of his head.



“Conqueror...” The captain squatted down beside her, his voice low and soft. “Who did this? What happened here last night?”

Her stomach clenched, forced sour into her throat. If she told him, a certain gladiator would decorate a cross by sundown. A small part of her wanted the same; Macon was no angel, but he was loyal. Not that the Leopard meant to kill him. Had she?

It didn’t matter. No one in the palace, not even Macon, knew the identity of the prisoner. Telling Bellerophon about the fight last night might lead to questions she didn’t want to answer, could ruin her only chance to make peace with the Amazons.

She lifted a limp arm to rearrange it across his chest. A shadow crossed her features. “Who found him?”

Bellerophon stood. “I did, Conqueror, when you sent me down to change the detail.”

She nodded, bent closer to examine the wound. She took a deep breath, caught a whiff of metal blood and bitterness. She frowned, stood abruptly.

“Take him to Ares’ temple. Arrange a soldier’s funeral. A quiet one. Put his ashes in the hall of warriors.” Bellerophon opened his mouth to argue, but the Conqueror cut him off. “Full honors, Captain. He died serving me faithfully.”

He saluted. “By your will.” At his gesture the soldiers hauled the body away.

She listened until she could no longer hear their footsteps, a very long time with her acute senses. Quietly she stole down the dim hallway, slid a key hidden in the folds of her robes into the lock of one very solid door.

The prisoner sat exactly as she did the night before, shoulders stretched at extreme angles, head down and hidden under stringy curls. If the Amazon was aware of the Conqueror’s presence, she showed no sign. Cautiously the warrior approached, wary of deception, took a fistful of copper hair and pulled the head up to rouse her. Deep puckered scars crossed her cheeks, nose, forehead, chin...she barely recognized the woman. A cruel comment died in her throat. “Still with us, Terreis?”

One eye cracked open, swiveled around in its socket before settling on the Conqueror. Dry split lips parted, rough tongue trying to shape words. “S-still.”

She sighed, left the cell, returned with a bucket of water, food, and manacles. One by one she released the Amazon’s wrists, ready for fists or claws to lash out. The bony limbs hung limp, unresisting. Once the manacles were secure she relaxed, offered a ladle of water to parched lips. The woman sputtered between greedy sips, took the proffered bread roll, though she needed help to lift it to her mouth.

“Who did this to you?”

One eyelid drooped, whether from swelling or scarring she couldn't tell. The other eye made up for it, blazed with green heat that burned down to a single coal of rage. "You already know."

The emotion in those three words dredged up old responses. She shoved them down, more desperate for answers. "I don't. I promised you wouldn't be harmed, didn't I? Who did this?"

"Your torturer."

She shook her head solemnly. "I'm the Conqueror. I don't need a torturer."

The prisoner glared at her, decided to play along. "A man. Hid his face behind a mask. Blue eyes."

Dark suspicions swirled in her mind. "Did he say anything?"

"He said my face offended you. Is that true? Perhaps it reminds you of my lands you took under treaty, my sisters you sold into slavery."

"You broke that treaty by sending assassins against me."

"Never. Amazons confront their enemies, not backstab them."

"I have a five-inch scar that says otherwise."

"Then she was no sister of mine."

The Conqueror sighed, unwilling to rehash old interrogations. "You've been in this cell a long time, Terreis, long enough to reconsider your position on this argument."

"I can't change the truth, Xena. Had I known what you would do to my people, I would have challenged you myself." Her faint voice shook with more than just anger for her people. Those knife wounds cut deep, all the way down to a disfigured soul.

"The Terreis I remember ruled her tribe through wisdom and negotiation. You're neither a warrior nor a killer."

"The worse for my sisters. Perhaps they would still be alive, and Grecian soil would not be so drunk with their blood."

The Conqueror blinked, the sour taste rising up again that she could not swallow away. She remembered the Queen as she was when they met, fiercely protective of her people, ridiculously optimistic about her ability to make the Conqueror see the error of her ways. Even enraged as the Conqueror was after the attempt on her life by an Amazon, she still marveled at the Queen's willingness to hand herself over to the Conqueror if it meant sparing her sisters. She saw no trace of that woman in the thing that looked at her now.

A thing that held her responsible for its creation. Her tactical experience said kill her now, quietly, before anyone could make the situation worse by telling the Amazons of her abuse. But was a dead Amazon queen truly better than a damaged one? Both would incite the Amazon Nation. Only one could be controlled by the Conqueror.

She rose with a sigh. “I never wanted to hurt you. But if you want a challenge, you’ll get one. Not against me. If you win the match, you get out of this cell. Those...” the prisoner jerked away from a brush against her cheek, “...will be tended to. You’ll get real food. And if you behave, we can discuss...other requests.”

The good eye wandered, considering her offer. “And if I lose?”

The warrior thought of the Amazon’s opponent, allowed herself a knowing smile. “You won’t.”

## 29 Proposita Designari Optima

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### Best Laid Plans

She locked the cell door and hurried back across the courtyard, mind racing. Her thoughts focused so intently on the planning of the match that she almost didn’t hear Vidalis calling to her.

He gasped with the effort of catching up with her. “Conqueror, she’s quite impressive. Elegant, charming, graceful, and very, ah, flexible...I can see why you find her so interesting.”

“Yes, she’ll need an outfit—what?”

“Of course, I’ll make sure she is dressed appropriately when she arrives after dinner tonight.” He looked at her expectantly. When she stared at him, clearly not comprehending, he cleared his throat. “The dancer?”

“What? No.” She realigned her thoughts, shook her head even more emphatically. “No.”

“Conqueror? I thought you were interested in—you haven’t wanted any companionship since your return—” He caught himself as realization dawned, lip curling as if stumbling upon the public toilets. “Forgive me. When you tire of her, the dancer will be waiting for you.”

She felt even more lost. “Tire of who?”

“Your Roman. The gladiator?”

“Tire of... No. No, we—” She stopped, processing his assumption. “You’re right. Perhaps I could use a change of pace.”

He brightened. “As you wish. Perhaps she can perform for us at dinner tonight.”

She shook her head, amazed at his persistence. “I need fighting leathers for a woman, an Amazon. They need to cover every inch of skin from head to toe. Everything. How long will it take you to make something?”

He considered. “Two days, if it’s urgent.”

“It is. Get on it. And send my body slave up to my chambers.”

He paused, confused. “Conqueror, wasn’t she with you?”

“No, I left her in the dining hall.”

“Begging the Conqueror’s pardon, but the dining hall was empty when I returned. I thought she followed you.”

A wave of queasiness hit, sharp in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard, forced her face to remain still. “Then I’m sure she’s in my chambers already. Please make arrangements for that outfit as soon as possible.”

She strode away, her excitement over the coming match waning with the absence of the primary player. The Leopard could not... would not have gone far. She hurried up to the royal bedchambers in the vain hope that the woman ended up there. The Fates were not so kind. She visited the infirmary, then the slaves’ quarters, then the dining hall, then back to the cell block, growing more concerned with each unproductive stop. Her thoughts traveled to darker places. She prowled the guest wing, wondering if the emissary’s attention toward her body slave had earned him a deadly afternoon visit.

No cries of alarm, no blood, no signs of the Leopard’s passage. She didn’t dare ask if any of the servants or slaves had seen her. Which would be worse, gossip that the Conqueror lost a slave, or she worried about her? Her long legs picked up speed, carried her faster than was proper through the labyrinth of halls. What if she somehow slipped out of the palace? Every moment spent looking and not sounding the alarm put her further away. But surely someone would notice her, a fair-haired Roman woman with a slave collar and a fighter’s physique.

The barracks. Would she be stupid enough—or resentful enough—to go there? Whether she went there intentionally or not, her presence would no doubt lead to trouble. The gladiator was a lightning rod for it.

“Joxer,” she growled, spying him standing in the hallway ahead. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I need you to find the Leopard—”

He stood quiet and still. She tracked his gaze into a private colonnaded courtyard. Shaded from the sun by the dense leaves of alders and poplars, a little girl ran in circles on the mossy cobbles, making nonsense noises to herself and swinging and bouncing a carved figurine in her hand while a woman sewed at a bench nearby.

“Hey, snap out of it, soldier. Let’s go.”

He lay a hand on her arm as she turned away. Her head snapped up at the impudence, ready to punch his teeth in if he didn’t remove the offending limb. He pointed. Not at the girl. Near the side entrance to the atrium, hidden in the shadow of the colonnade stood her gladiator, still as a statue. Neither the girl nor the woman seemed to notice the observer. The same could not be said for the Leopard; the strangest look gripped her face, her eyes fixed on the girl like a panther tracking a meal.

“What is she—how did you find her?”

“I didn’t. She just appeared.”

The Conqueror let out a pent-up breath. She circled around, entering the courtyard through the side door, careful not to arouse the attention of the girl or woman. Much closer now, she noted her strained pale face, her eyes on the girl but her mind a thousand leagues away.

Willing the hammering of her heart to slow, she forced a gentle calm into her being, sought the same stillness the slave’s escort was so good at cultivating, kept her voice low and non-threatening. “What are you doing here?”

For a long moment the animal beside her trembled, consumed by some struggle.

“Hey,” she breathed, stepping in front of her and blocking her view.

She blinked. When she finally raised her eyes, the Conqueror saw a woman she’d only glimpsed before, a living feeling breathing person who acknowledged hurt, who looked at her with such rawness her chest ached. “Why did you bring me here?”

Not the response she expected. She smiled to ease the sting of her words. “I own you. This is my home. Where else would I bring you?”

“Why? Why did you buy me? Why did you come to Rome? Why did we ever have to meet? There was a time I dreamt of nothing else. Why now? After everything that’s happened, why now?”

The Conqueror, shook her head, at a loss. “Why ask these questions? The Fates brought you to me. We can’t change it now, only make the best of it. You said I’d have to do my best to set things right, didn’t you? Well I am, and I need your help.” She lifted the gladiator’s chin, drew her drifting attention from the courtyard. “Are you listening?” The Leopard nodded. “Good. Come on. You have a match to lose.”

[Continued in Part 3](#)

**Spyrel's Scrolls**  
[Index Page](#)

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# Pretium Silenti

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The Price of Silence

By Spyrel

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**Disclaimer:** [See Part 1](#)

**Feedback:** Almost forgot. This is my first fic; if you like it, or even if you read it, please send your comments to [spyrel@yahoo.com](mailto:spyrel@yahoo.com).

**FYI:** To read this story in book formatting, visit [Spyrel's Descent](#).

## 30 Expectati

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Waiting

She sat in the dimness, lost herself in the dance of a mote of dust floating across sheets of sunlight. A shadow passed across the light, blocked the golden ray piercing her eye. She glanced up. Wide eyes peered down at her through the wooden slats, the small face of a boy regarding her with awe.

A soft nudge at her elbow. Scar held out a bowl of porridge. "You should eat something. The match isn't for another candlemark." She shook her head, but he pressed it into her hand. "Take it. She doesn't feed you enough. I always hear your stomach rumbling." As if on command it gurgled and clenched. She drew her lips into a grim line, pushed the bowl away.

He shrugged. "I know what you mean. I'm nervous too."

The room was extraordinarily quiet for the number of men and women waiting within. Grunts and monosyllables punctuated the hollow normally filled with conversations. Prisoners and combatants and guards focused every ounce of awareness on the minutes before them, the sounds above them. Too many of them looked at her with dull eyes, dead before they ever passed through those doors.

Hardness glittered back at them. No point wasting energy or concentration on something as useless as pity. They would either fight and win or fight and die. She couldn't help any of them, and she had her own performance to worry about.

With each opening of the gates, each rousing cheer of the crowd waiting beyond, the room thinned out. Guards dragged two of the wounded to the back of the sun-striped room to join the day's other casualties. Harried healers and assistants bustled between cots, staunching bleeding and stitching wounds. Ephiny worked among them, her face set, hands efficient. Between patients she glanced up once, her gaze settling on the Leopard. In the set of her jaw lurked lingering accusations. *This is your fault. You brought this upon us.*

Faintly she heard the crier announce another match. The last combatants, two of the Conqueror's most skillful soldiers, stepped out into the blinding sun.

She waited alone, her mind focused solely on her body, on sounds, on the fight to come.

Her escort hefted the armor over the red soldier's tunic. After years of being chained while guards strapped armor on for her, it felt strange buckling the familiar cuirass herself, unfettered by manacles. Only the thin gold collar around her neck served as a reminder of her status, that and her gentle shadow. She savored the ability to stretch her arms wide, tilted her face up to enjoy the warm light cutting through the room, allowed herself to pretend she was a freewoman. If fighting to the death for the entertainment of others counted as freedom.

The back gate opened. Two guards entered, escorting the chained prisoner. Beaded leather armor covered her from head to toe, her face hidden by a mask, a strange representation of a hawk fringed with a mane of feathers and grass. She might not have even known it was Terreis, if not for the mass of flame curls under the fringe. As Scar tightened the leather ties on her bracers she studied the queen of the Amazons, the way she swayed when forced to move, held abnormally still when left alone. Her eyes narrowed. Losing to this woman would not be easy.

A weight pulled back on her shoulders, shifted her center of balance as Scar clipped a heavy leopard skin to her armor. She scowled at the cape, at her escort. He shrugged apologetically. "Conqueror's orders."

The drone of the crowd above rose in volume. Wouldn't be long now. She adjusted her bootlaces under the bronze greaves, rolled her wrists to get the bracers to settle comfortably. Absently fingers scratched the back of her left hand, still itching where it healed.

She stole another glance back at the Amazon. Did she remember those long nights in the cell? Did she recognize a fellow prisoner? The mask stared straight ahead, showing no interest in



her. She wished she could see her eyes. What had the Conqueror told her? How hard would she fight? Was she in a lot of pain? Did she even have the strength to raise a weapon?

The gates flew open. Soldiers dragged one of the soldiers in, his feet plowing a deep furrow of black blood through virgin sand. The victor followed, smiling and waving, too drunk on the adoration of the crowd to notice his blood leaking out too fast. Ephiny jumped on him, pressed a bandage to his leg, swearing under her breath for protection from fools and despots while helping him toward the makeshift infirmary.

As soldier and healer passed the waiting prisoner, the queen's gauntleted hand reached out just a little, fingertips caressing the apprentice's leg as she hurried by. The gladiator stared, almost thought she'd imagined it, but once she got the soldier settled on a cot, Ephiny stole a furtive glance at the Amazon.

The gladiator's head snapped around as her escort pressed chobos into tingling palms. Though similar to the ones she used before, these were new, sporting freshly-oiled leather handles and bearing the carvings of the Conqueror's dragon interweaving itself up the length of each shaft.

The voice above seeped in once more. "...in today's final match, fighting for the first time for the pleasure of Corinth, the Conqueror's prize, the Leopard of Rome!"

The gates opened once more, and on the impenetrable whiteness rode the siren song of the crowd. Tension from the long wait melted away, and with a dark flutter of anticipation, she waded into the light.

## **31 Spectaculi Corinthi**

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### **Corinthian Spectacles**

Odd feelings of possessive pride swelled the Conqueror's chest as her gladiator took center stage, coolly appraising the hundreds of people shouting and cheering and booing from the shaded stands. She was a vision of beauty, strong and healthy and confident and powerful in a way the Conqueror had never seen before, her tiny presence commanding the crowd's attention, filling the newly consecrated arena of sand as no other combatant had.

The oval was hardly bigger than the ship they arrived on, quickly thrown together from wood and dirt, lacking any of the statues or color or finery of Caesar's prized battleground. But in Corinth it was a rare and wonderful spectacle, and the Corinthian audience cheered loud enough to be heard as far away as Athens.

The gladiator turned full circle, pale eyes finally coming to rest on the Conqueror. Fire leapt in her belly at the contact, at the confidence in that look.

Amun shifted as he recognized her, his eyes wide. “*She* is your prize fighter? Your body servant?” A slow grin settled on his face. “Wherever did you find such an interesting creature?”

She shrugged, smirked. “Got lucky.”

Beside her the speaker waited for the noise to die down before addressing the crowd once more. “Facing the Leopard is a fearsome fighter, known for her prowess both on and off the battlefield. Today she fights for a reprieve from the executioner. I give you Terreis, Queen of the Amazons!”

Jeers and catcalls greeted the prisoner, that and rotten food and coins. The Conqueror watched tension knot in the gladiator’s arms and shoulders. She glared not at her opponent but the crowd, no doubt still smarting from fresh memories of her own welcome by this mob. The Amazon weathered it well enough, kept her feet under her and didn’t acknowledge the hecklers. The mask focused solely on the gladiator and nothing else.

“Gladiators, face the Conqueror and bow.”

Chobos crossed in Amazon salute, the gladiator inclining her head, the queen bending stiffly at the waist and immediately taking a defensive fighting stance. Languidly the Leopard responded in kind. They circled, closing the distance, studying each other.

The first clash of the chobos ended as abruptly as it started, one of the Leopard’s fighting sticks flying from her hand. She rolled away before the Amazon could press the advantage, scooped up the dropped weapon and reset for another go. Not the opening gambit the Conqueror would have chosen, but it certainly opened the expectations early for a more even match.

The gladiator spun it in her hand, tightened her grip and blocked the next blow head on. Both chobos flew from her hands; she barely managed to turn her face before the strike split her cheekbone, sent her sprawling. She scuttled away until she could get her feet back under her, stared down at her palms. The arena was small enough that the Conqueror could clearly see the smear of blood upon them. Where had it come from? Was it hers? The Leopard’s shock turned to resentment and mistrust in the glare she threw the Conqueror. The warrior’s eyebrows knitted with questions.

The Leopard’s eyes flicked to her opponent, barely threw her forearms up in time to block the sticks arcing toward her head, landing flat on her back, stunned. The queen moved in to strike but a powerful leg hooked the back of her ankle, dropped her to the sand. They both scrambled up, the gladiator snatching up one chobo, then the other. Careful to keep a little more distance between them she glanced at the weapons, turning them over in her hands.

The moment she looked away the Amazon came in again. Lightning fast the gladiator flipped the chobos, gritted her teeth and blocked with the handles. This time she held on. Wood smacked against wood in a flurry of strikes and blocks. The Conqueror was impressed. Two days ago the prisoner could hardly lift her arms. Now she put every ounce of strength into each blow. Even so, she was wild and uncoordinated and not remotely as cunning and evasive as the Leopard.

Her slave finally settled into the rhythm of the fight, more comfortable holding the wrong ends of the sticks. The Conqueror relaxed a little; this was the match she expected. The gladiator would keep the fight moving along, make it look good until she got the signal, then leave an opening large enough to drive a siege engine through and wait for the woman to take her down. Easy, if the queen's endurance held.

And so things went for a while. The afternoon heat began to take its toll on the pair. The queen's blocks began to sag under the effort of swinging the chobos. The gladiator also began to droop, although never so much that she took another hard hit for it. The Conqueror's experienced eye detected the deception, made a note to watch for it next time they sparred.

In a lull between clashes the Leopard startled and spun, swiping at empty air behind her. Even the Amazon paused, surprised. By the time she took advantage of the distraction the gladiator turned again, ducked the swing meant to take her head off. A chobo jabbed into the queen's armored midsection, hard enough to knock the wind out of the Amazon and send her staggering back. The Conqueror growled; she explicitly forbade any serious injuries to the queen. That was a harder shot than she was supposed to deliver the entire match.

She felt Amun lean in. "What's wrong? I thought we were rooting for your slave."

The Conqueror gritted her teeth. "Poor technique," she grouched, left it at that.

The gladiator hung back, feigned a need to wipe bloody palms on the hem of her tunic while her opponent recovered. When she glanced up again, her eyes went wide. At what, the warrior couldn't tell, but something about the queen clearly rattled her. The queen lunged, driving the startled Leopard back, chobos whirling madly until they locked together. Nose to nose, the queen's slightest lean forward caused the gladiator to arch back in alarm. A trick, she surmised; any moment now she would shift her stance, give a little, slip to the side like she always did.

A quick scoop of the queen's foot dropped the gladiator hard in the sand. The Conqueror blinked. A raw recruit could have avoided that sweep.

The gladiator rolled over, scrambled to get her hands under her. The queen hauled back, planted a boot in ribs the gladiator made no effort to block. It lifted her off the ground, dropped her hard face first in the dirt. Watery elbows pushed her up from the sand, a knee dragged itself beneath her—

Another kick to the ribs, this one clearly in the soft spot between breastplate and backplate by the grimace it elicited. The Conqueror twitched, suppressed a groan as her ribs clenched in sympathy. Again her gladiator hauled herself up, teetered on one knee and elbow as the Amazon drew back a leg. Finally the Leopard showed sense enough to curl an arm against her ribs. The kick snapped her head back instead, dropped her flat on her back in the sand.

"Goodness," Amun chuckled, "it looks as if your slave is out of her league."

The Conqueror frowned. She'd told her to lose. She hadn't told her to get herself killed.

The slave stirred, eyes glassy as limbs waved ineffectually. The queen straddled her heaving chest, pinned her arms to the sand and leaned low. The crowd made too much noise to hear, but she could have sworn the queen whispered something in her ear. Whatever she said pierced the Leopard's daze, drew a howl—a howl!—from her clenched throat. The Conqueror jolted to her feet. The slave might have her toenails ripped out and not make that sound.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. A second scream from her slave, a strangled keen of hatred and pain, and she bucked the Amazon over her head, clawed across the sand to pounce on her. A single fist reared back, fractured the mask and the face beneath.

"Guards!" the Conqueror bellowed. They couldn't move fast enough. Her stomach twisted in a knot as her plan shattered under the gladiator's assault. Even after the queen lay still, blows rained down upon her. Not until her fists came away covered in red ichor did she tire, push away from the unrecognizable form drunkenly, a hand finding one of her chobos along the way.

Her skin flushed crimson with heat and exertion. Glazed eyes scanned the crowd, the archers taking positions along the top of the wall, the soldiers forming up around her. Her eyes slid past the Conqueror, didn't see the signal she gave for mercy that would end the match, didn't drop her chobo. Instead she swung at the closest soldier, driving him back. Gods, was she mad? The guards pressed in tighter, surrounding her, cutting off room to maneuver. She spun, the chobo clearing space in the constricting noose even as one knee buckled beneath her. She doubled over and spat up frothy bile, snapped her stick up and swiped blindly at menacing swords before they could close in for the kill.

The Conqueror leapt to the sand, silencing the crowd with a scowl. She strode over to the Amazon queen, checked the bloody heap for signs of life. "Take her to the healers. Now!" she barked.

The gladiator still held the remaining soldiers at bay with a stiff arm, staring at nothing with eyes so dilated they looked like black pools. The Conqueror stepped past the ring of soldiers, trying to draw her attention. "Parda? Do you hear me?"

The chobo thrust toward the voice, forced her back out of range. A dozen swords tried to close in on the Leopard, but she stopped them with a movement of her hand, eased in again. "Gabrielle?"

Again the chobo warding her off, even as squinting eyes failed to find her. Her lips moved, but the grunts that scraped out barely resembled words. The Conqueror glanced up at the hushed crowd, squared her jaw.

"Give me that weapon, slave. Fight's over." She held out a hand. The Conqueror expected to be obeyed. The warrior preparing for anything.

"No," her slave mumbled thickly. "Monsters."

That she spoke at all erased any doubt the Leopard was not herself.

The slave lunged at man beside her, drove him back, put her wobbly self squarely between her owner and the nearest soldier.

Mediterranean blue eyes flickered to the crowd, their hunger whetted for more bloodshed, eager for any resistance that would oblige her to order the slave's execution.

She lay cautious hands on knotted shoulders; unnatural heat poured off them in waves. Words began to tumble from her lips, arrows meant to pierce deaf ears and a remote mind. "Gabrielle, give me your weapon. They won't hurt me. They won't hurt you. I won't let them." As she spoke, one hand slid down the extended arm, closed around the blood-caked fist. "Listen to me. Trust me. Stop fighting. Let go." Long fingers gentled the fighting stick from a white-knuckled grip. The Leopard didn't seem to notice. She leaned in, full red lips breathing into burning ears. "Kneel, Gabrielle. This one time, submit to me." And softly, so softly that she was certain no one else could hear, "As a friend."

The gladiator's shoulders fluttered with each gasp. Almost twenty soldiers stared at them, swords drawn, bowstrings pulled taut.

One by one her physical defenses came down, surgically dismantled as only a professional fighter could. Even the mask fell away and she seemed to shrink, shapeshift into something strangely soft and innocuous. Troubled black eyes turned toward the Conqueror while one knee bent, then the other, hovering mid-way until tired legs gave out to drop her jarringly to her knees. She winced, one arm crushed against her side, propped her more or less upright in spite of the pronounced curl around her ribs. Breath oozed from tight lips, the high-pitched wheeze of air escaping an overfilled bladder.

A sharp glance at the announcer roused him from his captivated stare. He cleared his throat. "Good Corinthians, I give you the winner! The Conqueror proclaims these games concluded!" A half-hearted cheer rose from the stands. Only as the crowd departed did the tension in the arena dissipate. Swords lowered and bows creaked at the Conqueror's signal.

The Leopard hunched in the sand, head hanging, body shuddering with unnatural panting. Thick scarlet fluid bubbled from her bloated nose, crusted on a swollen upper lip. One cheekbone leaked red from the kiss of the chobo. Half-lidded eyes gazed at slack hands upon her thighs, stained dark with so much gore, hers and the Amazon queen's. She looked...lost.

The last of the onlookers filed out of the arena. The Conqueror sighed. "You may rise." She shook her head to herself, at a loss for how to get out of this newest mess.

"X-Xena?"

The Conqueror's head snapped up at the forbidden word. Gabrielle clambered to her feet shakily, her voice hoarse, slurred. "I feel a little...strange."

She never quite reached vertical, eyes rolling up to whites as she toppled.

## 32 Bella Domina

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### Beautiful Mistress

“Gabrielle?”

She groaned, pushed at air, threw an arm over her eyes.

“Gabrielle.”

Her stomach pitched and bubbled, spat acid at the thought of moving. She covered her ears, willed her visitor to go away.

“Is that the proper way to greet your Master?”

Her eyes snapped open.

Caesar’s chambers. Caesar’s bed. Caesar.

She startled backwards so fast she fairly levitated. Chains snapped tight, dropped her hard to the down-filled pallet.

“I don’t recall dismissing you.” He slid across Egyptian cotton sheets to lay a hand on golden manacles. Wild eyes snapped to exquisitely carved marble busts, polished gold serving bowls full of sumptuous fruit, fine purple drapery framing a view of Rome herself. He frowned at her confusion. “Oh dear. You didn’t think I’d let her keep you?”

Her heart hammered so hard in her chest she thought it might shatter.

He propped himself up on an elbow, smirked. “I must say, you were quite helpful to me with the senator. How much moreso now? Selling you to that old buzzard was one of those fate-inspired moments. Even though...” He leaned in, drew in a heady lungful of her scent. “Hmm...being this close to you does recall certain...diversions.”

He scooped up a fistful of white gold hair, pulled her lips to his. She stiff armed him, fists clenched, but he clucked at her. “Now, now, the arrangement hasn’t changed.” His eyes flickered over her shoulder.

She didn’t look, knew who stood there watching. Her arms sagged and she withdrew behind hooded eyes as he kissed her, long and hungry. His perfect fingernails brushed her throat, traced along her breast, her side. She retreated deeper inside, but a familiar flutter in her stomach betrayed her. He took her slowly, carefully, knowingly, wanted only one thing. Only ever one thing. Control. They warred silently, her flesh the battleground, the pawn, the traitor, until she gasped and shuddered, outmaneuvered again.

He finished with a groan, low and undignified, face red, lips twisted in an unconscious sneer. Finally he rolled away, panting, body slick with sweat. “You always disappoint me, Gabrielle. No passion, no spirit. Now Xena, on the other hand...there’s a woman who loves a good fuck. She and I, we’re exactly alike. Look at her go.”

Cold water flooded under her skin as she reluctantly followed his gaze. In the Conqueror’s luxurious bed she lay, eyes closed, her features limned in the warm glow of a dying hearth fire. Not asleep, and not alone. Something—someone—moved between her thighs, rhythmically rocking to a silent song that pleased the Conqueror.

“Exquisite, isn’t she?” Caesar stood over her, the back of his hand caressing a warm cheek with sickening familiarity. The slave stood frozen across the room, afraid to make a sound lest the Conqueror open her eyes.

Xena moaned, clutched at the form above her, squeezed an ample breast. Breath caught in the Leopard’s throat. The woman ground harder into the Conqueror, her hand lost in the space between them.

“Why so shocked?” he whispered in her ear. “Hasn’t she taken you to her bed yet?”

The woman flipped thick black hair over her shoulder. The Egyptian dancer. The gladiator swallowed, the meaning in her parting look suddenly clear, one slave challenging another for the right to pleasure the Conqueror.

Caesar’s eyebrows crawled into his hairline. “Hm. Pity. I suppose a broken thing like you hardly meets her standards. This one is far more lovely. Eager, too.”

He stood behind the Conqueror’s gyrating partner, his palms hovering over the arched back, thin waist, full ass, admiring her as he spoke. “I believe my servant made my wishes known to you, yes? Yet days go by and you do nothing. You dine with her. You sleep in her chambers. You drill with weapons while she stands within arm’s reach. You sleep in your bed while she lies helpless under the ministrations of her lovers. So I must ask you, are my expectations unclear?”

With the barest twitch she shook her head, unable to take her eyes off the two women.

“I didn’t think so. And is there any doubt in your simple peasant mind as to what will happen if you refuse?”

Again, the tiniest jerk of her chin side to side.

“Excellent. Now do what you do best. Go find something sharp to put an end to her existence.”

She wavered, legs stiff as marble, iron bands squeezing her chest.

“Come, Gabrielle, we haven’t got all night. You know there’s a knife on the food table. Or are you having second thoughts about your priorities?”

How she came to stand by the table she didn’t know. Numb fingers wrapped around the blade, held it clipped against her forearm while she drifted silently across the floor. Just within range of the oblivious pair she held back, her knees trembling.

“Is there a problem?” snapped her former owner, his patience wearing thin.

She didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel right. The knife in her hand didn’t sit comfortably. Her legs wouldn’t hold steady. Her vision blurred. She shook her head, narrowed her focus down to the Destroyer of Nations, to her blade suddenly hovering above the bare throat.

Pale eyes stared up at her, the Conqueror’s pleasure forgotten.

She should have slashed and been done with it. She’d seen the Conqueror’s reflexes, knew from experience how quick she could be with that jab to the neck. But once again she held an edge to that strong pulse and hesitated, unwilling to make the final cut.

“What are you doing?”

She couldn’t be sure who asked. Xena, whose lips moved, or Caesar, whose voice bored into her skull. The dancer skulked away, melded with the shadows.

“Kill her. What are you waiting for?”

She quivered with ragged breaths, licking lips suddenly dry.

With one long finger, the Conqueror casually raised the tip of the blade. “Put that away. You’re not yourself—”

She growled, lifting that fine jaw with the knife’s edge. No, she was most definitely not herself. She was someone else entirely, someone the Conqueror didn’t know.

Caesar leaned over the headboard, his handsome face inches from hers. “Finish her. Do it.” She sucked in a desperate breath, suffocating under his whispers.

The Conqueror’s eyes took in the room. “Gabrielle, think.”

Caesar ground his teeth. “Think? Since when have you ever been trained to think? Leave the thinking to poets and philosophers. You don’t think. You kill.”

A strangled sound crept out, caught between wanting to explain and trying to obey.



“Gabrielle, talk to me.” The woman looked alarmed, less for herself than the gladiator. She shoved the knife’s edge harder against the bare throat, would end her life with a single slice, easy. She’d done it before. So why did that porcelain face still her hand, steal her breath?

“Finish this, pet. Everything will be back to the way it was.” Caesar snaked against her back, one hand gliding down her abdomen to cup her sex. Her eyes squeezed shut against the intimate touch, the hated heat, the bubbling in her stomach.

A punch to the jaw sent her flying, tumbling across the rugs. She heard more than saw her coming, stumbled back. Vision swimming, instinct alone deflected some of the punches. Not a good way to fight, particularly against a combatant as notoriously skillful as the Conqueror. She ducked a swing, sidestepped into a kick that sent her crashing down on top of a wooden stand. Her hand closed around something and she swung blind, connecting with the warrior’s leg and dropping her. In the momentary respite she scrabbled to her feet and backed away, trying to get her bearings, recover her senses, assess the bruises and tickle of blood upon her lip and cheek.

“What are you doing?” Caesar screamed in her ear. “Kill her!”

Automatically she moved to comply, but a vision behind the prone warrior stole the very air from her chest. The leather-clad woman leaned heavily against a column, one leg twisted almost beyond function. From her dislocated shoulders dangled broken arms and fingers clinging to a weathered pair of gladii. The ghost raised her head, nearly unrecognizable under the long dark matted curls and swollen face.

“Kill her, sister. Mercy in a gladiator is no virtue. You taught me that.” At her stare, the ghost smiled. “Had you forgotten about me? The teacher you betrayed for Caesar? He gave you an order.”

She looked down at the Conqueror, met the woman’s questioning eyes. She jerked her head, as much shudder as protest.

“You refuse? Have you no honor? No sense of duty to your master?” When the gladiator couldn’t move, her mentor smirked. “Fine. This crippled old woman will do it herself.” She shuffled forward, awkwardly raised a gladius to strike the Conqueror.

The Leopard lunged first, drove her own sword deep into the woman’s side, caught her as she fell.

Bloated lips worked for few moments before sound oozed out. “Good girl.”

Her throat clenched, swallowing the sting of those words. She cradled the Amazon to her chest, smoothed dark curls away from her bloody face. Strange that no tears came this time. Did she have none left for the old queen, or none left for herself?

Caesar knelt to croon in her ear. “As maudlin a scene as I remember it—”

She roughly shouldered him away.

“Melosa’s right, though. Mercy is for the weak and the dead. When was mercy ever shown to you?”

Without thinking her eyes slid to the Conqueror.

“Xena? Show you mercy? The woman who hung you from the mast of her ship? The one who uses you as a poison taster? The one who forces you to fight for her amusement? Surely you don’t think she does anything except for herself. Had you forgotten all that? Let me put it another way. You just tried to kill the Conqueror. If she lives, your life is forfeit.”

Her heart warred with itself. The Leopard nodded, pushed herself heavily to her feet. Tired words tumbling from her lips. “He’s right.”

“Who’s right?”

She jerked her head. “Caesar.”

Eyes darted behind her. “Gabrielle, there’s no one there.”

“He’s—” She gestured, blinked slowly at the empty space where he’d stood. The Amazon queen’s body was gone too. She shook her head to clear it, immediately regretted it as the room spun a little, made her stomach do a slow roll. “Doesn’t matter. He ordered me to kill you.”

“Caesar?”

“The Egyptian.”

A sneer on her lips. “Did he?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll make it quick.” She set her stance, raised her guard.

“Is that so? With what?”

She held up her sword, found it gone from her hand.

“You’re not in the best shape.” The Conqueror rippled and blurred like a vision on a hot summer’s day. “Are you sure you can take me in your condition?”

“Condition?” She swayed, steadied herself on a column, only to jerk back as it writhed under her palm, an enormous snake stretched from floor to ceiling. She bumped into the Conqueror, jumped again. She opened her mouth to warn her, but the column was plain drab stone once more.

Gentle hands steadied her. “Maybe you should lie down for a while.”

She took stock of a disconnected body, reluctantly nodded. "Just until he comes back."

"The Egyptian?"

"Caesar."

"Fine."

Careful arms guided her to a plush bed draped in pristine white linens. She sank down onto it, hissed at the stab in her ribs. "She got me good." As the pain ebbed she sagged, smiled to herself. "My blocks were never much use against Melosa."

Probing fingers stopped. "Melosa? Queen Melosa?"

She sighed, tired. "She was just here, remember? Caesar loved to watch her fight. She taught me how to use the chobos, how to survive in the arena. When Caesar tired of her, he let his guard beat her half to death for sport before he had me kill her. After her, they got easier."

"They?"

She jerked at the press against her ribs, saw spots, answered through clenched teeth, "The kills."

"What kills?"

A shrug. "Officers. Diplomats. Senators. He never did like to get his hands dirty."

The Conqueror's hands stilled. "I'll be damned. Bellerophon was right. You *are* an assassin."

She couldn't read the Xena's expression, thought she detected disappointment. Betrayal. "I wasn't sent to kill you. Please believe me. The senator was my target, when Caesar gave the word. Then you arrived. I don't think even he could anticipate you buying me. In the house of his enemy I hoped to be free of him, but he has eyes even here."

The Conqueror grunted. "He'll be blind soon enough."

Hands dug like arrows in her side, left her feeling light-headed and far away. A cloth wiped blood and perspiration from her face. "I don't want to, you know. Kill you. I've never met anyone like you."

"That's the beautiful lady talking."

Her brow wrinkled. "You...think I'm beautiful?"

The Conqueror shook her head, half irritated, half amused. "Never mind. I have an idea." She began tearing a fine white sheet into strips. "You don't want to kill me, but Caesar's ordered you

to, right?” She nodded, mesmerized by the squeal of ripping fabric. “What if you don’t get another chance? Caesar can’t expect you to follow through until you have an opportunity.” One end of a strip knotted around her wrist, pulled it snugly to the bed. “Right?”

She tested the knot warily. “I suppose.”

Another knot slipped over the other wrist. She jerked against it, but Xena took her hand. “He won’t. He has an advantage here if he doesn’t waste it. He’ll wait until the right moment. Trust me.”

It made sense. The other wrist pulled tight to the bed. More ties pinned her down. Nerves prickled in her gut. “Xena?”

“Yes?”

“Are you going to execute me? For trying to kill you?”

She stopped, thought about that. “Not tonight.” She pulled a sheet up to the gladiator’s shoulders, tucked it in, shuffled out of sight.

“Xena?”

A sigh. “What?”

“I’m sorry I interrupted you...with the dancer.”

A pause. “S alright. I was...thinking about something else.”

More answer than she expected. The dancer’s glare surfaced, unbridled hatred for a rival. “Xena?”

“What now?”

“Will you have me service you someday?”

The silence from the other side of the room deafened, long enough to make the gladiator flush with nervous imagination. “Is that what you want?”

The very thought made the already warm air go thick and heavy in her chest. “No.”

The word bounced around the chamber for a few moments. “Good. I don’t do damaged merchandise.”

Stung, she wrestled with those words for some time.

“Xena?”

“By the gods, what?”

“Are we going back to Corinth?”

“We are in Corinth.”

The bright marble halls of Caesar’s palace faded to the drab stone of the Conqueror’s dim chambers. Inky windows let the weak hearth light escape into the night. “Oh. Do you like it here? In Corinth?”

The silence stretched out, long enough to know she’d overstepped some invisible boundary. “Go to sleep, Gabrielle.”

She didn’t sleep. She lay awake for a long time, wrists fidgeting against the ties, wondering if she would die come morning. Wondering what happened to the people she’d left behind in Rome. What the Conqueror was like as a lover. Most of all, she wondered if she could kill her when the opportunity arose.

### 33 Confessiones

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#### Confessions

Her throat hurt, scraped and bruised and overused. A dry swallow made her wince.

Which reminded her that her face hurt. She reached up to rub her cheek.

Which reminded her that she couldn’t lift her arms.

With dread, she cracked open one eye.

Her eyeball felt like a chunk of pumice tumbling around in its socket: hard, not-quite round, and scratchy. And a poor replacement for an eye. It wouldn’t stay still on any one thing, certainly didn’t focus. Every jiggle left an afterimage, a trail behind each object that blended into an indecipherable mess. She closed it, expecting a surge of nausea.

It never came. Slowly she opened them both, found the jittering and smearing to be a little more manageable.

The rod of white in a wash of dark looked suspiciously familiar, and with persistence she recognized a tall narrow window that threw a shaft of light across the room, splashed upon the Conqueror’s opulent bed and bounced into the shadowed corners of the chambers.

The Conqueror's chambers. Her cot, tucked in the corner. She tried to sit up, couldn't raise shoulders or knees or arms. Memories came back to her in scraps and ashes of Xena telling her something. Telling her many things, actually, and she spoke of many things in kind, but this was something important, something both soothing and disturbing at the same time.

The ties. She was tied down. "Why?" she would ask.

"Because of the beautiful lady," the Conqueror would reply. And her mind would wander, pondering this cryptic answer, and then she'd forget and ask all over again. How many times did they have the same conversation? A dozen? More? But she remembered this time and relaxed.

"Xe—?" The name lodged in her parched throat. Another swallow, like drinking powdered glass. Best she could do to wet her tongue. "Xena?"

Movement then, too fast, like swallows streaking out of the barn rafters when she was a girl. It startled her then and it startled her now, moreso since she couldn't quite bring her eyes to focus on the face looming over her. Not Xena's.

"Still alive." Ephiny sounded disappointed as she took her chin in a firm grip, peeled back an eyelid. The Leopard tried to shake off her forceful touch, found herself too exhausted to fight back...much. But the effort earned a different expression from the apprentice: curiosity. "Hey, you in there? Do you hear me?"

She snarled at the harassment, glared daggers at the apprentice if she didn't let go.

"I'll be a centaur's mother, you're looking right at me. She's back," the apprentice called over her shoulder, returning small clay pots and leather bags to her satchel. She paused midway, looked down peculiarly. "The Conqueror says you chose not to kill the queen. Is that true?"

Her brow furrowed.

"The queen? The match in the arena? You pounding her face to porridge?" Her tone took on a harder edge. "She says you backed off to spare her life. Looked to me like you ran out of strength before you finished the job. So I want to know. Did you mean to kill her?"

She stared up into hard eyes, at a loss for how to respond.

"You don't remember any of it? The match? The poisoning? What you did—?"

"Leave her alone." Scar appeared over her shoulder, his face hard. "You heard what the Conqueror said."

She hardly looked at him. "The Conqueror's not here. I can ask questions."

"I'm here." His threat was unmistakable. "Besides," he said, reading the gladiator's face, "she won't answer you now. Should have asked when you had the chance."

Her stomach clenched. What chance? What poisoning? Who had she been talking to besides the Conqueror?

Ephiny's hazel eyes never wavered. "Did you mean to kill her? Maim her? Or just humiliate her?"

She shook her head, desperately trying to recall what the woman wanted to know. All she could remember was one fleeting forbidden touch between healer and prisoner.

"Stop it. By the end of that fight she was out of her head. She didn't know what she was doing." The scarred soldier's tenor edged away from cool detachment, settled somewhere near protective.

"Centaur dung. I saw the look on her face. Pure rage." She leaned in, dropped her voice. "I heard what you did to Melosa. Do you hate all Amazons, or just Amazon queens?"

"That's enough." The low growl turned the apprentice's head in fear. She backed away, the sudden dark void filled with the Conqueror's blurry face. The gladiator gasped in relief, blinked furiously to clear the fuzziness from her vision, the odd stinging from her eyelids. "Relax. Close your eyes." She obeyed, not questioning why. "Open." Again the light assaulted her, the brightness of the window, the paleness of the Conqueror's face. She cringed, still dreading a bout of nausea that never manifested, willing the streamers to fade.

"No dilation. Ephiny, looks like you get to live. You can return to your duties. Send me an update on the prisoner. And pass my compliments along to the old man."

"By your will," the apprentice forced past a clenched jaw.

The Conqueror ignored her, set to work slowly untying the knots, eyes fixed on her. An undercurrent of static seemed to crackle between them, but she couldn't read the Conqueror's expression, some strange mix of wariness, concern, and anger. "You almost left me."

Perplexed, her mouth opened, closed again soundlessly. She rolled her wrists, working out soreness from struggles she couldn't remember.

"Can you sit up?" In spite of the Conqueror's neutral tone, but it didn't take an oracle to know she was in trouble. She took the offered hand, found herself relying on it to pull herself upright.

A spear through her side and sparkling lights made her tilt, might have dumped her to the cold stone floor if not for steady hands on her shoulders. Now she did feel like vomiting. She sat still a long time, willing the weakness away, knuckles locked anxiously on anything that didn't move until the swaying passed. She opened her eyes to find cloth-wrapped fingers dug deep into the warlord's shoulder. Immediately they let go, burned by the fine silks they crushed. She looked away before she could gauge the Conqueror's response.

Moments dragged by, heavy with embarrassment. The Conqueror drew a long inhale. “Do you remember how you got here?”

The gladiator looked up again, vaguely past her at the waiting guard. She shook her head no.

The Conqueror’s lips drew into a thin line. “Leave us.” Her eyes burned into the gladiator, and for a moment she struggled to comply. A hand stilled her. “Not you.”

Scar cleared his throat. “Begging the Conqueror’s pardon, but she could still be—”

“She wasn’t dangerous then, and she isn’t now.” She sighed then at his concern. “Wait in the hall if you must.”

The chamber doors latched shut behind the departing soldier. For many long heartbeats neither of them moved, unsure what to do or say next. At least that’s how the slave read her owner. For her part, she knew what she needed. Sitting up cost her too much. The pain in her ribs alternated between vicious knifing and concerted throbbing. She felt tired, heavy, altogether wrong, as if coated with mud inside and out. Her cot rocked on ocean waves she couldn’t see. All she wanted was to lay her spinning head on something unmoving, and only the fact that the strong shoulder before her belonged to the most powerful woman in the Mediterranean made her pause.

Which left her suspended in discomfort, barely breathing, muscles locked protectively around injuries she couldn’t remember, waiting for the Conqueror to ask something, say something, do something—anything—to let her know what she’d done wrong and what she was supposed to do next.

Xena drew a long slow breath. “Does that shade of green mean you need a chamberpot?”

She took stock of her stomach, realized by the way it rubbed up against her spine that there wasn’t enough in there to eject. A strangely comforting thought. She shook her head again, wobbled with the motion, gritted teeth and willed herself to stay upright. That shoulder was still there, still looked appallingly inviting. She closed her eyes, shoving the thought away.

“Do you remember the match?”

The match. Unbidden images leapt to mind, of the sun-streaked staging room, the passage of bodies and souls through the gates, the makeshift infirmary, the healer, the prisoner—

“The apprentice, Ephiny,” she croaked, her throat tasting of copper with the effort. “She said I nearly beat the queen to death. Is that true?”

The Conqueror got up, returned moments later with a cup of clear water and pressed it into her hands. “You tell me.”



“I remember fighting her, but...” A horror rose up in her mind, the screech of a monstrous gryphon, its long beak snapping hungrily at her face. She shut her eyes against it, tried to squeeze the vision out. “I don’t remember how it ended.”

The Conqueror studied her. “But you do remember something.”

Desperate for liquid on her tongue and throat, she took a long drag from the cup, swallowed with effort. It did nothing to take the edge off her thirst. Another gulp finished off the cup, left her mouth dry as sand. She stared into its depths, debated asking for more, thought better of it until she collected scattered thoughts. “Yes, I remember things. Impossible things, like dreams come to life. Or nightmares.” The visions reasserted themselves, bizarre and violent, too real to be imagined. Her throbbing eyes focused on the fingers she clenched and unclenched in her lap, wrapped like sausages. She held them up. “What happened?”

The Conqueror retrieved one of the dragon-carved chobos. Dry blood crusted both ends. “Sabotage. Razors embedded in the handle under the wrap. From the first hit they cut through and into you.”

Her memory jolted. She nodded. “I remember. After I flipped them around they weren’t a problem. Why would someone bother?”

“The handles were soaked in poison. *Belladonna*.”

“Beautiful lady,” she breathed, finally understanding. “Thank the gods I didn’t get much of it.”

Xena snorted. “You got enough. For three days straight you barely breathed or raved like a lunatic.” Unconsciously the Leopard’s fingers brushed her raw throat. The Conqueror chuckled, not unkindly. “I’ll bet it’s sore. Once you start talking, you don’t stop.”

She couldn’t breathe. The knifing in her ribs dug deep, tapped an older wound. “Wh—what did I say?”

“Oh, many things, what parts I could make out. Stories, mostly, about the gods, old heroes, your family. About Xena, the honorable Warrior Princess. About your deadly uses to Caesar outside the arena.” The last sent a chill through the Leopard; she hardly noticed the battered sword until it rested nonchalantly on her shoulder next to her throat. “What did the Egyptian say to you?”

She could barely move, much less defend herself. She stilled, cautious of the cold steel nipping at her neck, chose her words carefully. “He said my old master had eyes even here, and I must kill you if I—if I want to go home.”

“Home.” The Conqueror weighed the truth of her words. “And would you?”

The question caught her off guard, put her instantly on the defensive. “I’ve killed many others.”

“But would you kill me?”

Discomfort prickled in her gut. “I’ve already tried.”

“Yes. More than once as I recall. Although technically, holding a serving spoon to my throat doesn’t count as an actual attempt. But twice now you haven’t gone through with it. What’s stopping you?”

She struggled to sort through the jumble of feelings. “Fear, maybe.”

“Fear? I don’t believe it,” she sneered. “What could the Leopard of Rome possibly be afraid of? Being caught? Punishment?” The edge of the blade scraped against the pulse in her neck. “Death?”

The gladiator took a ragged breath, considered how to explain. “You own me. Your life is my life. My very short future is to live and die by your side or by your hand. Do you honestly think I don’t know your death will be my death?”

“Fear of what then?”

That was the harder question. She struggled to make sense of her feelings. “Of living, maybe. Going back to that existence. To him. To the arena. To silence. To a life without—” *You*, she almost said, caught herself in that absurdity of that statement. “Without hope. I can hardly face what I’ve done as it is. Tartarus would be a relief.”

The sword at her throat wavered. After long deliberation, the Conqueror pulled away, sheathed the blade. “There is no relief in Tartarus for people like us.”

*Like us.* The crack in the warlord’s customary detachment, the intensity of her words touched something in the slave. Her nose wrinkled in a wry smile. “Well, at least you’d have me for company.”

“Great. Stuck for eternity with my troublesome slave cum assassin.” A sobering thought. “I can’t have you trying to kill me all the time.”

The slave picked at the linen wrapped around her fingers, unable to look her in the eye. “Back to the cell?”

“No,” she said without hesitation. “So far as I’m concerned, someone tried to kill you, and until we figure out who, I want you where I can see you.”

“As protection?”

“As bait.” Her slow blink earned a chuckle. “And protection.” If some other purpose crossed her mind then, it never found a voice. “Within these chambers, no manacles...on one condition. No attempts on my life. Give me a chance to deal with Caesar’s spies. So long as you’re locked up, he can’t expect you to strike. Besides, I’m not some old general or fat senator. I’ve survived better assassins than you, and I wouldn’t enjoy your execution.” The warlord’s wide easy smile was meant to be conciliatory, but diamond chips glittered in her pale eyes.

The killer inside stirred, sized up the Conqueror in turn, her assessment straining her chest with feelings somewhere between pride and nausea. In her palm she felt the pressure of the spectral knife, remembered the twitch of the pulse beneath. That the Conqueror still lived spoke more of a lack of will on her part than skill. Such had always been her problem with killing, a weakness Caesar took great pains to eradicate. She’d begun to believe he’d succeeded, before she met Xena.

“Are you listening?”

Her mind snapped back, tried to resurrect the conversation. “My execution.”

She shook her head. “I said you’ll have to be restrained outside these chambers until the spies are dealt with. Will you do this for me?”

She rubbed her wrists, calloused from years of chains, scratched her neck under the gold collar. After days half-remembered of feverish soul-baring conversations, this was not the way she envisioned standing next to the Conqueror, as some pet on a leash.

The Conqueror read her reservation. “Do you remember the end of your match?”

*Xena surrounded by hoary beasts, their long frosted claws reaching—* She shook her head, not certain which memories were real.

“After the fight, when you wouldn’t stand down to the soldiers, I asked you to submit to me. Not as a slave. Never once has the slave surrendered to the Conqueror. But the Leopard has relinquished control and put her life in my hands more times than I can count.”

Green eyes snapped up, wary, uncertain. “I...don’t remember that.”

“You don’t think you could have been tied down without your consent or a stiff fight, do you?”

That much was true. Fragments of memories filtered in. “But...there was a fight, wasn’t there?”

“Oh, many. When you weren’t talking, you were fighting.”

The slave thought she detected a grim note of humor. And then she saw them, ochre bruises on the Conqueror’s neck, masked by a high collar. Reflexively she reached out to touch. Her

owner stood abruptly, walked over to pour more water. A slow steady exhale under her breath. “I did that.”

“No. Caesar did that. You let me go.”

The pressure on her chest eased, let her breathe a little. She sighed. “What about the queen? Ephiny said I tried to kill her.”

“You hurt her pretty bad, true. But I don’t believe your strength failed you. Trust me, you had plenty left to take on my men. I think some part of you pulled back. Maybe you recognized her. Or maybe you just aren’t the heartless murderer Caesar wants you to think you are.”

Bitterness. “You don’t know me—”

“I think I do. I think hours of listening to your thoughts and opinions and stories qualifies as an education. I know what the joy of the kill looks like. You don’t have it. That you even wonder about it proves me right.”

She opened her mouth to argue, stopped herself. True or not, the Conqueror didn’t believe it. She took a deep breath. “What happens now? With the Amazons?”

“Their queen still lives. We’ll make the most of second chances.” The Conqueror’s voice projected confidence, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to look the slave in the eye.

## V Insidiae Inescarae

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The Baited Snare

### 34 Respondit Cleopatram

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Answering Cleopatra

Heat coursed down on the raised platform, on the officers and citizens assembled in the square. It prickled the Conqueror's skin, leeches moisture from her lips. Unconsciously she reached for her goblet, found it empty, refilled it herself. Her body slave would not be pouring for her today.

Her eyes flickered to the woman standing near the rear of the platform. In the battered armor and leopard skin cape, she looked every bit a prized Roman gladiator. The collar and manacles on her wrists only enhanced the effect. She stood still as marble, tensed muscles pulling the chains tight and silent, as if they pushed her wrists apart rather than held them together. Even her eyes looked oddly vacant.

A howl yanked the Conqueror's attention back to the open area before the dais, the swing of a mallet onto the shins of an unfortunate soul. The third today.

A second swing, the jarring crunch rippling through those assembled. Even the Conqueror twitched, instantly scowled at herself.

"Well struck!"

She turned slowly to regard Amun raising his cup in jovial salute. The Egyptian delegate leaned in from his seat, whispered to her conspiratorially, "I think your executioner is a tad out of breath with the festivities today. Certainly he needs a more vigorous workout."

Acid bubbled in her stomach and in her veins. None of it reached her smile. “There’s not much crime to speak of in my lands anymore. Not enough executions to keep him in shape. But you are right. After we’re finished perhaps I’ll choose a new man. He can start by practicing on his predecessor.” The expected answer from the Destroyer of Nations. He laughed, and her ruby red lips smiled. If it lacked warmth, he didn’t notice.

“I’m so glad you suggested we stay one more day. This display of the Conqueror’s justice has been most inspiring.”

“I’m pleased, Amun. Besides, a little fresh air has helped me get a better perspective on Cleopatra’s changing needs. If her people are truly suffering from the drought, perhaps I should ease her tribute this year. As you say, that gold could be better spent buying grain to feed my loyal Egyptian subjects.”

Amun broke into a bright grin, bowed his head. “Conqueror, your wisdom in this matter is breathtaking.”

“And your flattery overwhelming. I see why Cleopatra regards you so highly.”

He inclined his head with a smirk, returned to the cross-raising.

The Conqueror swirled the wine in her goblet, took another gulp. “Then again, that extra gold could buy other things, too. Ships. Weapons. The loyalty of a Roman legion.”

Kohl-blackened eyes cut to her.

Her lips curled in a smile, broad and lazy. “Hadn’t you heard? Five thousand Roman legionaries landed at Nicopolis weeks ago. Bad for your queen, to be caught between my rule and Caesar’s aspirations. Worse still if she invited them. There are few things I dislike more than betrayal to Caesar.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but a chain latched around his windpipe. Thick manicured hands clutched at it, at the Leopard’s wrists, his features swelling with strain. The officer beside him rose, caught the Leopard’s heel in his throat before his sword even cleared its scabbard. She cinched down harder on the delegate’s throat, out of reach of struggling elbows, letting time finish the job.

In that long hushed minute, punctuated by occasional jerks of the emissary’s legs, the Conqueror glimpsed something in her slave. Not the same demon she housed within her own heart, always hungry for the rush of a kill. This thing in her slave was flat, distant, inhuman. In place of the willful young woman stood soulless flesh intent on its task. An arrow loosed from the bow. Except an arrow felt more.

This was Caesar’s creation.

She lay a hand on the gladiator's bunched arm, looked into unfocused green eyes, willed them to look back. They did, cold and remote. She offered the tiniest shake of her head.

Instantly the gladiator's grip loosened, some warmth returning to her eyes. But the thing still lurked there, waiting to for the order to finish him off.

The Conqueror cast her rich voice above the murmuring of the crowd. "Amun, also known as Marius Licentius, agent of Rome, you are charged with sedition. The penalty is death by crucifixion. Have you anything to say?"

He gurgled against the chain. At her nod, the Leopard unlooped her manacles from his purple neck, shoved him to the front of the platform with a boot. He rasped with each breath, rubbing his neck. Cornered eyes locked on the slave. "Stupid girl."

"Save your breath, spy. Caesar's eyes and ears will be joining you in Tartarus." She beckoned. Guards escorted a chain of captive servants, soldiers, and citizens into the square.

The delegate took in the faces of those arrested. Some strength fled his face, left him older and frailer.

"You have something to offer, spy? Information on Caesar's plot against Greece?" She didn't expect any such thing. Men like Amun were chosen to lead such plots because of their fanatic loyalty. No, his network of informers had already proven quite cooperative. The delegate stood a little straighter. "It's only a matter of time, Xena. Caesar will rule Greece, with or without your death."

She studied his face, his stance, smiled when certain he had no more cards to play but words. "Kinetos?" she called to the puffing executioner. "Before you get started, bring me his tongue." Her eyes raked the condemned. "Bring all of them."

The executioner complied, swift and proficient, deaf to the roar of the crowd. Still, something niggled at the Conqueror, prompted her to scan the crowds. They could have missed someone. Word could still get back to Rome. The mob glared back, surly and spiteful, angry at the Egyptian, the conspirators, the soldiers, the gladiator, even the Conqueror. Some days sheer charisma and force of will held them at bay. Like her army. Like her enemies.

The executioner's knife cut deep. Arms raised in unison, a great whoop of victory drowned out the delegate's scream. In moments the rough tongue lay in her palm, warm and heavy. She smiled. Nothing unified the mob like a common enemy. A shrewd smile found the gladiator—

—who rushed her, chained arms outstretched. Instinct brought her guard up, her palm rearing back to shatter the slave's nose.

Nerves hummed to alertness at the twang of a bow. She turned, feeling the arrow zooming toward her breast, her hand moving of its own accord as the Leopard launched. The Leopard reached her first, sent them tumbling to the platform.

Everyone moved at once. Soldiers charged into the crowd. Citizens scattered like dry leaves. Through the chaos cut the booming voice of Bellerophon. "Kill the assassin!"

"No!" She shoved the gladiator off, jumped to her feet. "I want him alive." In four long strides she snatched from the dirt the discarded bow. The crude craftsmanship looked all too familiar. She rolled the feathers and beadwork between thumb and forefinger, a rage boiling up in her belly. "I want *her* alive."

A familiar presence filled the space at her elbow. She didn't turn, pitched her voice for the slave alone. "That was a stupid thing to do. I can take care of myself."

She sensed the slave's nod in a creak of leather and a ragged exhale.

"Joxer!" She tossed the bow to the Dragon. "Take that back to my quarters. Kinetos? Finish your business, starting with that thrice-cursed son of a jackal Amun."

Bellerophon ran to her and saluted. "Conqueror, the gates are sealed and extra guards are deploying to the walls. Citizens reported a strange woman running toward the temple district. We're concentrating our search there, with four squads searching house to house. We'll find her."

"I'm very disappointed, Captain. Give me your sword."

The Dragon blanched, but otherwise kept his composure. "Conqueror?"

"I can't go hunting without a sword, can I?"

He let out a held breath as he handed it over.

She preferred him sweating. "She'd better be found, Bellerophon. Otherwise I might have to start asking how a woman with a bow got past your guards."

He saluted. "By your will." Snapping orders he left, eager to put distance between them. Wise man.

She flashed her stone-faced companion a fiendish grin. "Told you the bitches would show up. Did you get a look at the woman's face?" The Leopard offered a single tight nod. She couldn't suppress a smile. "Come on then. I feel like hunting rabbit."

The gladiator had to hustle to stay close as she marched through the streets, stalking past houses and carts and shops eerily empty on a summer afternoon. When the Conqueror took notice of them, they scurried back into the shadows of doorways and windows like human roaches, bruised and disheveled from the soldier's passing. One cradled a screaming baby to her chest, fresh blood trickling from the corner of her swelling lip. She did not shrink from the Destroyer's gaze, looked mad as Hades and powerless to do anything about it. The Conqueror's skin prickled, the cool breeze of vulnerability blowing across her calloused soul.



Clothes and furniture flew out a door and into the street ahead, victims of a zealous squad. She hurried by without slowing, gradually became aware of the absence of her shadow. The gladiator stood frozen, gaze riveted on the family outside, the young woman they clapped in irons. "Let's go," she snapped, gesturing vaguely with her sword. Slowly the Leopard followed, her gaze lingering on the ransacking.

Finally they approached a crumbling temple. Vines crept over the arch of the doorway, crisped by the late summer heat. The place looked abandoned, if not for the swept porch and the dim flicker of torches within.

"Amazon Elysium. If she isn't here, someone here knows her. Come on."

The slave rooted into the ground, resisted the hand on her arm.

"I said let's go. We may not have much time—"

The woman shook her head. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

The Conqueror followed her gaze. Chiseled into the lintel above the arch, a bow and crescent moon warned enemies of who resided within.

"Oh, for Ares's sake. You think killing one Amazon queen earns you the undying enmity of a washed-up goddess? I've done things to her Amazons that make Hera look benevolent. If Artemis hasn't struck me dead by now, she won't even notice a nobody like you. Now get in here." A tug jerked the gladiator across the threshold. When the sky didn't split open, the Conqueror shot a knowing smirk over her shoulder.

"Your presence is not welcome here," thrummed a harsh voice. The gladiator stiffened against the iron grip, eager to leave, but the Conqueror held tight. Echoes faded, and from behind the curtain at the far side of the room stepped a woman. Not an incensed goddess; a priestess in white armor. The temple's keeper maintained her distance but otherwise showed no regard for the blade her visitor brandished so casually.

"That's alright. I don't mind." The Destroyer turned away, scrutinized the scenes painted on the walls. Hunts through verdant forests. A stag chased by dogs and women. A woman bathing under the moon. She smiled at the priestess. "It's unlawful to harbor Amazons in my realm. Of course, you know that. We're looking for one. An assassin. She didn't by chance duck in here when you weren't looking?"

The priestess lifted her chin. "If I wasn't looking, how would I know?"

"I see your point. Guess we'll just have to have a look around. Let me call the guards. I'm sure Artemis won't mind if we rearrange her house in the name of a hunt. Oh, is this a leaf prayer book?" She picked it up the delicate string of dried leaves, turned them over casually. "Looks fragile. Are you sure there's no chance she might have slipped in here? Did you want to take another look?"

“You hold no power here, Xena. You cannot lay the daughters of Artemis any lower. Destroy the prayers. Nothing is permanent, and nothing is irreplaceable.”

She tossed the artifact back on the pedestal. “And what about you? Can I lay you any lower?” The tip of the sword grazed the priestess’ chin, bobbed at her throat. “Your predecessor didn’t last very long. I had hoped her replacement might show more wisdom.”

The priestess opened her mouth to answer, but a crash from the room behind her cut her off. The Conqueror swatted her aside, carved through the shroud to see legs dangling from a smoke vent in the roof, trying to kick and squirm through the small hole. She leapt up and pulled, dropped the Amazon to the hard-packed dirt. The girl groped for twin blades at her sides, found a sword at her throat before she could pull them.

“Is she the one?” She spared a glimpse over her shoulder. Hesitantly the Leopard nodded. She fixed the young Amazon with a hungry smile. “Time to die, assassin.”

She expected the girl to try something stupid. She even expected stupidity from the priestess. She did not expect chains to catch the sword, wrap steel around steel and jerk it from her hand.

The Conqueror stared at the gladiator, shock bleeding into rage. Her fist lashed out, flattened the slave with a blow to the jaw that must have loosened teeth. The girl took her chance and lunged over the fallen gladiator, blade drawing and slicing simultaneously, laying open the silk sleeve of her dress and the arm underneath. In one pathetically easy motion the Conqueror grabbed her wrist and twisted it behind her back. “Drop it or I’ll tear your arm off.” She wrenched it to the limits of the shoulder to make her point. The short blade clattered on the flagstones.

The Leopard pushed herself up, murmured something thickly.

“Now you talk? Speak up!” She shook the girl in her arms, elicited a yelp.

The gladiator worked her jaw. Pain-sharp eyes glanced at the priestess in the doorway, back to the Conqueror and her catch, reluctantly pitched her voice loud enough to be heard. “I’m yours. I speak only for you. I belong to you.”

“Roman whore!” The red-headed spitfire in the Conqueror’s arms thrashed, a leg catching the gladiator under the chin and knocking her on her back.

“I’ve had enough of you,” the Conqueror growled in her captive’s ear, drawing the girl’s own blade.

“No!” The shout bounced off the walls of the small room. The Leopard worked herself up on one elbow, spat blood, forced the words out carefully. “She could be useful to you. Provide information about the Amazons. Be used as leverage against her sisters, even the queen. Maybe she could end this, one way or another.”

The girl struggled. “No! I’d rather die! Finish it!”

In the girl’s ear, “You’re too mouthy for your own good, worm.” She locked eyes with her slave, tossed her the key to the manacles. “Fine, we’ll try it your way. Get up. We’re going.”

She managed, if slowly, favoring a shoulder. The shackles came off to be locked again around the Amazon’s wrists. As they marched back to the palace she fumed, robbed of the satisfaction of skewering the girl, angrier still at the gladiator for interfering for the second time today. That she had a point did little to soften the fact that the slave defied the Conqueror—fought with her, even—in front of witnesses. In front of enemies. She would not tolerate displays of defiance in front of enemies.

“Move it!” she snapped at the lagging gladiator as they wended a path through the streets. Dimly it registered that the Leopard wore no chains well beyond the walls of the palace. She could bolt at any moment, make good the escape she once considered. That night, watching from the antechamber as the Leopard wrestled with her first taste of freedom, the Conqueror had asked what kept her from running.

*Not sure. You, I suppose.*

It had been an unguarded answer, betraying a conflicted heart. She never once thought the Leopard spoke from a place of fear. Awe, perhaps, but never fear. But that was long ago, long enough for the shine to wear off, the reality of the Conqueror’s true nature to set in. That the woman continued to trudge through the streets back to certain captivity, head down, never once glancing around to even gauge her chances, brought on the faintest twinges of discomfort. She didn’t understand her, couldn’t fathom why the woman saved her from an arrow only to challenge her later over the worthless life of a criminal. The Leopard’s motives mystified her, made her unpredictable and dangerous.

The square stood vacant but for the forlorn bodies upon the crosses, heads hanging, arms opened wide to embrace the barren sky. At the palace gates she grabbed a soldier, sent him off to find the captain and call off the search.

She headed straight to the dungeon, tossed the prisoner into the same cell the gladiator had occupied. Once out of the Conqueror’s crushing grip the girl recovered some fire, sneered through the bars of her cage, “I had you, Xena.”

“No you didn’t,” the Conqueror sighed, turning away.

“Amarice had the great Xena! If your bitch hadn’t interfered, you’d be on the road to a long slow death!”

“No I wouldn’t,” she called over her shoulder.

She ignored the rest of the girl’s rantings, happy to put them behind her, go to her chambers, put a cool cloth on her head and think. The Leopard followed, pale and unreadable. Perhaps she

expected the tongue lashing she deserved. The Conqueror had no stomach for it now, wanted only to crawl into the tepid waters of the bath and rest. Without a word between them she stripped off the ceremonial dress, pulled on the robe already laid out for her on the bed. Gods bless Vidalis.

Under the robe lay the bow next to an arrow. The tip was missing, snapped off, but the dusty Amazon fletching was unmistakable. She grunted softly, curious. Where had he found it?

“Xena?” The Leopard stared at her, at the arrow. Her beautiful face and clothes and armor, so breathtaking before, now bore as much dust and grime as a day in the arena. “Back in the courtyard—”

She cut the slave off with a curt shake of her head. “I’m not in the mood to hear excuses.” As expected, the slave’s mouth clamped shut. At least the Conqueror could still intimidate her. Sometimes. She let go of a long held breath. “Come. I need a bath. Then we’ll get you out of those things.”

She dropped the robe and slid into the water, letting it wash over her sweltering head. As she surfaced cool water sluiced down her back, damping the anger under her skin. “It’s dangerous to get between me and my objectives.”

“I know.”

“If you know, why did you do it? Your defiance makes me look weak.”

“I didn’t defy you,” the gladiator snapped. “I questioned you. That’s different.”

The warlord stared, caught off guard by the Leopard’s prickliness. She leaned in, eyes hard. “Questioning is defying. Rumors will fly that a slave influences the decisions of the Conqueror, that my decisions are flawed—”

“That decision was flawed!” The gladiator caught herself shouting, reined in her emotions and her tone. “Killing her would achieve nothing but satisfying your personal desire for vengeance. Greece needs more—”

“Greece? Who are you to lecture me on the needs of Greece?”

“A Greek! Like you! An enemy of Rome! Like you! I’m on your side! Why can’t you see that?”

“You’re out of line—”

“I’m not speaking as your slave, Xena, I’m speaking as a free woman of Greece—!”

“You are not free!”

The echoes of their shouts faded from the chamber, left them both swimming in a heated quiet.

The slave recovered her voice first. “I shouldn’t—I’m tired—”

“Don’t.” The Conqueror turned away, sullen. “Never make excuses. If you’re going to make the decisions of a leader, you better start acting like one. Do you have a plan for what to do with the girl?”

The turn in conversation threw the woman off. “No,” she finally murmured. She took a sponge to the warrior’s neck, absently worked long tracks across her shoulders. “Offer to spare her life if Queen Terreis calls off the assassins.”

“No. Absolutely not. If an attempt on my life leads to successful negotiations, dozens more will follow. Besides, Terreis won’t care about the life of one failed assassin.”

“Perhaps she’s a relative. Someone the queen cares about.”

“Not likely. I killed most of her family and friends myself.”

The sponge paused mid-rub, resumed more slowly. “The girl’s still a member of her tribe. Isn’t Terreis responsible for her, for them? She has to do what’s best for her people—”

The Conqueror rolled her eyes. “By the gods. See this?” She reach under her arm, fingered an ugly scar that ran between ribs from side to spine. “This is what she considers best for her people. One of her Amazons infiltrated my personal guard and almost filleted me. I would have been perfectly content to ignore her tribe. She left me no choice.”

A light touch traced the scar, gentle and reverent. Strange tremors fluttered across the Conqueror’s skin. Before the finger reached her side she ducked under the water, feeling the sudden need to rinse. When she broke the surface the Leopard sat a little farther away, fidgeted with the sponge as she chose her words. “She was wrong to do that. But don’t you think she would do anything to take it back? Give anything to undo the damage done to her tribe, to help her people?”

The Conqueror shook her head. “You’re talking about a woman laid up in the infirmary at this very moment because I promised her an easy match in the arena. She has every reason to hate me, and you. She’s not thinking about the good of her people right now.”

A long exhale. “Interrogate the girl then.”

She took the sponge from cool fingers, worked it against her chest. “She won’t know much. She’s young and hot-headed, too impulsive to be trusted with secrets.”

“She knows who sent her to kill you, can give you names of known Amazons.”

“Maybe.” Scrubbing absently at her stinging arm, the Conqueror half-turned. “You really want me to interrogate her? There wouldn’t be much left to give back to her queen. Is that how you want to start this brave new alliance with the Amazon nation?”

The slave slumped. “No.” She stared at her hands, finally looked up. “If you were so certain she was of no use to you, why’d you spare her life?”

She thought of the Leopard leaping between her sword and the assassin, nearly powerless to stop her but determined to try. “I wasn’t certain. You were. I took a chance. Don’t. Let. Me. Down,” she growled, poking the dusty arm for punctuation.

The Leopard nodded, deadly serious. Finally the Conqueror cracked the faintest twinge of a smile, set to work in earnest with the sponge. “They’re not bad ideas. Keep thinking. We’ll figure something out.”

The woman nodded, let go of the conversation if not the problem. After a few minutes of silence, “Maybe I should send for a healer.”

“A healer? For what?” Pink rinsed from her sponge, trickled from the cut down her arm. “For this? It’s nothing.”

They kept quiet for a while as she scrubbed the sweat from her skin, humming to herself. When she finally glanced up again, the gladiator looked different somehow, strangely deflated, distant. Xena cocked her head. “What are you thinking?”

The gladiator stared a thousand leagues away. “I should have seen her sooner. In the square. I couldn’t stop looking at Amun. And then I saw the bow and the girl, and I couldn’t move fast enough.”

“What are you talking about? Everything worked out. I’m fine. You’re fine.”

Vaguely the Leopard shook her head. “I don’t think so. No. Most definitely not.”

Curious how colorless the slave’s cheeks looked. She sat up. “What’s wrong?”

Eyes gone dark met hers. “I’m sorry.”

Her jaw clenched. “Sorry for what?”

“Xena, I...I’ve been shot.”

Bath water sloshed across the floor. “Stupid, stupid woman!” The Conqueror’s long fingers groped feverishly at the clasps and hooks of the stiff armor.

Her own fingers were less helpful, cool and clumsy. “Don’t be angry. It’s not bad.”

The heavy leopard skin fell from her shoulders, brought some relief to formless discomfort. A growled oath behind her. Reflexively she reached, found the shaft’s ragged stub buried high in the leather backplate between shoulder and neck. A steady stream of curses flowed from the Destroyer’s lips, grated on her already ragged senses.

“Please, I’m fine. Can’t really feel it. Just itches, that’s all—”

“Stupid stubborn...why didn’t you say something sooner?”

She wondered why? After the look of violence in the Conqueror’s eye moments before they collided, her hand rearing back for a hit meant to kill? The snarl on her face when she’d shoved the Leopard off, too angry to notice her wince and pale. The venom in her voice...*That was a stupid thing to do. I can take care of myself.* The brush off in the rush to catch her would-be assassin. She gave up on the buckles of her armor and sighed, uncomfortable at the naked truth—she was hurt that Xena would be angry at her for wanting to protect her, angry enough to not even notice her injury. She buried that hurt deep; the Conqueror showed little interest in her feelings, even less when they drove her to recklessness. “I didn’t want to be any more trouble. I started to, when I saw the broken arrow—”

Her breath hitched as the armor came off, jostled the shaft. A palm caught her as she swayed, pulled away soaked in red. For a moment they both stared at the dark smear before the warlord growled and ripped the fine linen in two, lay the shoulder bare. Curiously, painfully, she craned her neck to peer at the arrowhead. It peeked out under her collarbone like some baleful half-lidded eye, crying scarlet tears down breast and stomach.

“Stupid, stubborn woman!”

Cool air scraped across her clammy skin like a cat’s tongue, dry and coarse. She shuddered. “Please, it’s fine, just pull it out—”

The Conqueror threw on her robes. The gladiator barely had time to cover herself with the torn tunic before being dragged out of the chambers and down to the courtyard. Familiar steps led down into the dim chill of the infirmary.

“Demetrius!”

The healer scrambled to help her sit on a bench at a long table. She would have much preferred a bed. Every movement of her head made her shoulder and chest ache. She twitched when he peeled back the edges of the wound, clucked to himself thoughtfully. “Can you move it?”

The shoulder rolled slowly, reluctantly. Not good enough. She raised it, pushing higher and higher, desperate to show it was alright, said nothing of the icy pain that numbed her fingers.

“Let me.” The healer took her elbow, delicately testing the range of motion. Nearly every direction brought a wince, but pulling the arm back stole her breath. Muscles locked down to protect the wound, prevent the moan that threatened to ooze out. Eyes fixed on a point across the room, anything to hold on to until the hurt passed.

She found herself staring at the fiery red mane and quilted face of Terreis. More than a week since the match, and the swelling and bruises still made her almost unrecognizable. Dulled by pain and herbs, one unswollen eye pinned the Leopard to the bench. She looked away uneasily.

“...wedged against the bone. If we can’t push it through, I’ll have to cut it out.”

“No. You cut it out and she might never use the arm again. She’s no use to me if she can’t fight. We pull it, one way or another.”

“And if it won’t budge?”

They stood apart from her, kept their voices low as they argued. She pretended not to hear, didn’t want to hear, but the Conqueror’s words sat like a stone in her gut.

Her hand crept up to test the sharp tip protruding from her skin. The collarbone pulsed with formless pressure. Arm forward was better, raised the bone and relieved the ache; she lay her elbow on the table, eased her forehead down beside it. The wood sent another chill through clammy skin, but at least it afforded some rest. The muttering continued, grew more heated. The arrowhead kept drawing her eye, mocking her while they argued.

*No use to me if she can’t fight.*

She fumbled with the arrowhead, pulled on it. Useless. Her fingers couldn’t get a grip on the blood-slicked metal tip bulging under reddened flesh. Jaw set, she pushed skin back against sharp edges, widening the hole. Cold sweat trickled down her forehead, dripped from brow and nose to the floor. Her hand trembled so bad it could hardly manage the bloody task; sheer pigheadedness made her grit her teeth and keep working at it. Little by little more of the tip showed, the crowning head stretching skin to its limits. Just when the point became too big, the hurt too great, skin tore over one of the twin barbs of the broad head and settled in behind, followed by a fresh trickle of red down chest and tip.

She panted for air around the pain. The bared barb bit into raw flesh with each movement of her chest, its mate still lodged under the collarbone. With a few more shallow breaths to collect herself, she grasped the half-exposed head between thumb and forefinger and, before she could have second-thoughts, twisted.

She couldn’t kill the sound. Strangled behind clenched teeth, it squeezed out as a shrill whimper.



A hand pulled her back from the table, wrenching her shoulder and ripping another cry from her throat. Half-blind with pain she shoved it off, forced fumbling fingers around the head to pull. More hands tried to pull hers away. Impatiently she shook them off, hooked two fingers under the barbs and strained with all her fading strength.

Inch by inch, it slid free.

A hot gush down her icy breast, the void filling with seeping cold. She raised her head, held the arrow up to the light to see. It swam in and out of focus, dimmed to orange and crimson and black shadows. Her face bounced off table on the scenic route to the floor.

Shouts. Hands caught her before she hit, lifting, pinning, hurting her. Fingers dug into her cheeks, wedged her jaw open, pressed a wooden dowel between her teeth. Her vision still dark, the bit stirred ugly memories of Caesar, of helplessness, pain, humiliation. Instinctively fingers dug like claws into the flesh around her, muscles straining against the bodies holding her down. The bit dug cruelly into the corners of her mouth. She panted around it, dizzy and disoriented. If she passed out now, she would be defenseless. Through the fog of fear wormed a familiar voice, low and steady, warm breath whispering at her cheek.

That more than anything made her stop struggling, cling to awareness through the pounding in her head, Xena's voice in the darkness, the warm flesh under her sticky frozen grasp.

White pain and the smell of melting flesh, a distant shriek that might have been hers. The sound of sizzling lingered well after the iron departed. She knew what was coming, didn't get a moment's rest before the hot poker found the hole in her back. She jerked and groaned, teeth threatening to splinter the bit.

They let go, left her curled around quivering flesh while the fire trapped under her skin faded. Her thick dry tongue worked the bit from her mouth, spat out fragments of wood. She pushed herself up with one arm, propped against the table while some sight returned.

"Where are you going now?" demanded Ephiny.

She cast off, watery knees held stiff for the short voyage to a row of cots. A hand took her elbow, kept her from collapsing outright on a straw pallet, lowered her into a waiting pit of darkness.

She slept fitfully. Dreamt of the Amazon girl, Amarice, on the jailer's stained table. Watched while the Conqueror worked her over in the name of interrogation. When those blows had no effect the cloaked visitor stepped in, put blade to face to sculpt another terrible masterpiece. She wanted to shout, tell the Conqueror to stop, that she'd changed her mind.

"How many sisters will you destroy?"

The silvery tingle of moonlight made her shiver. "Artemis," she breathed. "Please, I tried to help her—"

“Help her? As you helped Melosa? Betrayer. Murderer. You will be hunted by your sisters until your dying breath.” She drew her powerful bow, held string to cheek as she lined up the Conqueror. The gladiator stood frozen, unable to even shout as the arrow let fly.

But it was the torturer who silently jerked and crumpled to the floor. The hood fell away. She gaped at her sightless self.

“No.” Even as she backed away the Conqueror handed her the knife, guided her toward the table. Wooden feet crossed the distance, arms on invisible strings making the first cut. It wasn’t the Amazon girl she carved into. Terreis glared up at her through one swollen eye—

She gasped for air, shot back to awareness with a jolt. Still reeling from the nightmare, it took her long moments to register the burn sinking into her cheek. Curiously her hand brushed buzzing skin, stirred the beginnings of pain. A shadow loomed over her. The glowing green eye. The scarred puffy face.

“Get up!” the queen hissed, threatening another backhand. The Leopard’s eyes darted around the infirmary. No one else occupied the room, not even a healer. A second blow turned the stinging into throbbing and she held up a hand of surrender, slid reluctantly from the cot.

“So the bitch’s tool is damaged. How lucky for me.”

She could have blocked the punch, didn’t. As blows went, it paled in comparison to the Conqueror’s, didn’t turn day to night or alter the passage of time. But it was vicious in its own right, sharp-knuckled and penetrating. She resisted the urge to rub her jaw, noted with grim satisfaction the way the woman flexed her hand.

“Up for a rematch?” A fist to the other side punctuated her point. She yielded to it, spared herself the very worst of the blow. A breath to control her emotions, then she squared her face to look at the queen again.

A backfist connected with an already swollen jaw before she could adjust for it. Pain exploded through her mouth, white and red and black in succession. She staggered back, hissing through clenched teeth, willing the automatic fury back down.

Some of it must have crept into her eyes. The queen mocked her with a pout. “I’m sorry. Did that hurt?” Only a jerk of the head to the side spared her a broken nose from the next punch. She stumbled back into the wall, blinking against stars, flinging heavy drops of red with a shake of her head. Terreis’s arm pinned her there, pressed into her windpipe mercilessly. Her hands balled into fists; pitilessly she held them at her side, refused to let them retaliate.

The queen bent so close now she could trace every ribbon of red in the crazed blood-shot eye. One finger caressed her face as her sweet voice crooned, “Where is the monster that killed my sister? Perhaps it needs more...encouragement.”

Clawed fingers dug into her traumatized shoulder, pierced blackened holes.

A howl gurgled from her throat. Her fist shot out; she jerked it back before it pummeled the Amazon, convulsed against repeated urges to lash out—

“Stop! Terreis, stop!”

Ephiny wrestled the queen away. The Leopard slumped, coughing, her shoulder on fire, not daring to take her eyes off them as they argued in low tones. Even across the room she could feel the queen’s acid stare, returned it in kind. Not until Terreis rested once more on her cot, overtaken by a sleeping draught, did the Leopard look away. Even then she remained wary of the apprentice, retreated when she came to look at her shoulder.

“Stop that.” Ephiny waited impatiently, showed no signs of backing off. With a frustrated sigh she relented, drew some measure of support from the wall at her back while the apprentice prodded angry flesh. Her examination wandered to cheek and jaw and brow until the Leopard jerked away from her touch, hard green eyes glaring warning. She snatched the rag for herself and wiped the trickle of blood under her nose, pressed it tenderly into the freshly seeping hole in her chest.

Ephiny shook her head. “Why didn’t you fight back?”

She surprised herself by growling, “You were wrong.”

The apprentice stared at her.

“You said I tried to kill her. You were wrong. That day I saw—” She swallowed, suddenly uneasy. “I thought I saw a lot of the things, but her mask...I thought she...” The words sounded silly now, empty, unconvincing. “I never meant to hurt her.” Every word went against her better judgment, betrayed Xena’s trust. She pressed on. “I know Terreis hates the Conqueror, but you have to reason with her. Persuade her to go along with whatever plan my mistress suggests.”

Her mistress. She cringed. When had that word entered her vocabulary?

The hazel eyes hardened suspiciously. “Why me?”

She weighed how much to say. “You love her. You love your people. This war must end, or you’ll be the last of your kind.”

“I’m not—”

She cut her off. “Your callouses. The way you look at her. The touches. It was you I heard singing in her cell.”

The apprentice shifted, looked like she might argue. Instead her jaw tightened. “The war could have ended today. Why did you save her?”

The Leopard didn't reply, couldn't. She searched the floor for answers, rejecting uncomfortable vague feelings for more convenient facts. "She didn't start this. She doesn't deserve to die for it."

"True or not, she deserves to die for what she's done since."

No counter-arguments offered themselves. She shook her head. "Please. Talk to your queen. Convince her to call off her assassins."

Ephiny gestured at the queen in frustration. "Her assassins? Does she look like she's in any position to command her people?"

The slave stared hard at the queen, a guest of the infirmary for the past week, the dungeon for a long time before that. Cut off from the outside world but through one Amazon sister. "No." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "But you are...Regent."

A guess. As the moments ticked by without protest she grew more certain. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "You ordered the assassination."

"Never! Amazons meet their enemies face to face. The Conqueror lies."

Her patience with the stubborn woman evaporated. One finger stabbed toward the door. "There is an Amazon assassin in the dungeon right now. I saw her do it. I pulled her arrow out of my chest—"

"An arrow with a metal tip! Amazons use stone! Or didn't Queen Melosa teach you that?"

She jutted out her chin defiantly, but the Regent's words seeded doubt in the field of her certainty. She gritted her teeth. "If she's not an Amazon, who is she?"

Ephiny snorted. "Who knows? I don't know that girl from Hippolyta. And Amazons aren't the Conqueror's only enemies."

"Then why did we find her in Artemis' temple?"

"Not everyone who worships Artemis is an Amazon."

They battled silently again, the Leopard stubbornly skeptical. This time Ephiny backed down. "Fine. You don't believe me? Come on."

She grabbed cloaks off the wall, tossed one to the Leopard as she headed out the door. A flutter of uneasiness made the Leopard hesitate. Her mistress already questioned her loyalties once today. Wandering around the palace in the dark of night with the Regent of the Amazons would only feed those suspicions. But said Regent waited impatiently. Gods, trouble sought her out like warlords on Hestian virgins. She sighed, slung the wool around her shoulders one-armed and followed.

Her chest tightened as they stole around the edges of the courtyard, her fears confirmed when they crept down the stairs leading to the cell block. Sneaking around to talk to the Conqueror's would-be assassin would definitely count as treason. She hung back unhappily.

"I thought you wanted proof. Or does the Conqueror tell you what to think as well?"

She shot the Amazon a glare, sucked in her cheeks. If caught in the dungeon, she would already deserve punishment. What difference would it make if she were inside or out? Bare feet padded after the apprentice, crept to the occupied cell.

"Who's there?" Owlishly the guard on duty peered at them from the lit room at the end, hand laid less-than-casually on the hilt of his sword.

"Just me, Phavo."

"Ephiny?" He blinked, relaxed. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry I woke you. Just finishing my rounds."

"This late?"

She laughed. "Don't remind me."

He squinted. "Who's that with you?"

The Leopard shrank deeper into the hood.

The apprentice shrugged. "One of the kitchen slaves. How's your elbow?"

Automatically he flexed it. "Better, thanks. You need in?"

"Nope." She pulled from her cloak a crust of bread, tossed it into the cell. Movement in the dark made the gladiator jump, remember what they came for. The girl crept into view, fixed rabid eyes on the Regent as she shoved the brittle husk into her mouth.

Not a hint of recognition. Just rage.

*See?* "Let's go." The Amazon tugged on her arm, drew her away from the approaching guard.

"Wait a minute. You, slave, hold up."

She stopped, heart pounding, turned slowly.

"Take these back to the kitchen." Food-crusts shoved against her chest. She bit hard on her lip, took them and bowed.

Not until they were skirting the courtyard did the apprentice speak. “I’ve never seen that girl before in my life, and she’s never seen me. If she’s an Amazon, she’s not from my tribe.” Ephiny glanced back, almost choked trying to keep a straight face. “Counting how many ways to kill a man with his bowls?”

Her jaw clenched around the void where a witty reply should be.

Ephiny just laughed, took the stack from her arm, offered a steady hand under her elbow. She resisted the urge to shake it off, accepted the help without protest. Something changed in the air between them on the way back to the infirmary, some ease born of necessity. Not trust really. An acceptance of fate. Certainly the Regent would be executed as a spy if the slave exposed her. Then again, that clandestine visit to the dungeon could be enough evidence of collusion to warrant two crosses.

Though they didn’t speak of it again, the crackle of antagonism was gone. Truces could be short-lived, but the Leopard didn’t care. For the night at least, she could sleep knowing the apprentice would watch over her, protect her from the queen’s reprisals. And tomorrow...they might find some way out of this political nightmare after all.

## 36 Flumen

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### The River

The stairway down loomed before the Conqueror, soft voices beckoning within. That she’d come here didn’t surprise her; she’d already spent every ounce of willpower the day before avoiding it. The fact that weak morning sun barely crested the palace walls did give her pause.

Sleeplessness brought an early morning workout, the sky then barely hinting at the dusty blues and purples to come. She blamed her restlessness on a lack of news from Egypt, aimed to burn the dissatisfaction away with a long bout of training. An hour later she’d purged a heavy sweat and little else.

An inspection of the Dragon’s barracks proved tedious, and she broke it off less than halfway through with a dismissive gesture at Captain Marcus.

He didn’t quite manage to hide his disappointment. “Begging your pardon, Conqueror, but the soldiers were looking forward to your visit. Some confess to missing your company.”

She cut him a look. “My weekly inspections aren’t enough?”

He blushed, a difficult thing with his dark complexion, turned his head away from the men. “Forgiveness, Conqueror, but it’s been almost a moon since your last inspection.”

A moon? She opened her mouth to argue, snapped it shut. "I've been occupied...pressing matters of state." One of those matters of state lay in the healer's care across the courtyard. Interwoven with threats of assassination and a looming war with Egypt and Rome wandered thoughts of the slave. She shored up the weak excuse with a clap on the back. "The men look good, Captain. A little fat, maybe. I think we could all use some action."

He flashed his easy smile, one that reminded her of happier, simpler days. "Ares willing. I can't recall a summer with you as peaceful and boring as this one."

She knew him too well to be fooled. Marcus was a talented captain and a strong soldier, but his heart had grown tired of conquest long before hers. Two years in Corinth transformed him into a capable administrator and respectable family man. If he looked forward to another military campaign, it was only through the misty eye of a man grown older.

So she offered a tight smile, excused herself as quickly as possible. Which is how she came to stand at the top of the steps to the infirmary, squinting up at the white morning sun and wondering if the gladiator was up yet. Doubtful. She turned away, then turned back, her mind made up.

Several faces glanced her way when she entered the sweat-stale room. No one looked surprised to see her. Was she so transparent?

The gladiator still slept. She sat on the edge of the cot, mesmerized by the rise and fall of the bandaged chest, the soft youth of her face, free of the tension that often followed her into sleep. The swollen nose and purpling under her eyes didn't escape the Conqueror's notice either. A low growl rose from her breast. She pushed herself up to set someone straight.

A hand on her wrist, gentle but strong. She sank down again, her rising anger forgotten in the gentleness of those sleepy eyes. "Morning. Feeling better?"

The Leopard rewarded her with a broad lazy smile. She helped her sit up, offered a hand to lean on while the other prodded the shoulder. "Fresh bandages. Is it still bleeding?"

The gladiator shrugged.

"What about these?" One knuckle brushed the knot on the bridge of her nose, the swelling along her jaw. "Where did they come from?"

"Must've happened when she fell." Ephiny approached, a steaming bowl of porridge in her hand. "I remember her mistaking the table for a pillow. Hungry?"

The Leopard nodded, wedged the bowl in her lap and attacked it with the wooden spoon. In moments the gruel was gone. The Conqueror arched one fine eyebrow, snapped her fingers at the apprentice. Soon another bowl appeared, one the slave devoured more politely.

She eyed the second empty bowl, shook her head. “You’d think you hadn’t eaten in two days.” Embarrassed, the slave ducked her chin. She smiled. “Don’t. A strong appetite is a virtue.”

When the Leopard said nothing she faltered, at a loss for how to keep the one-sided conversation going. When no ideas came to mind she stood. “Court is waiting for me. And there’s the Amazon to deal with, so I’m going to go—”

The gladiator swung her legs over, pushed up stiffly from the cot.

“Where are you going?” she demanded in her most fearsome tone.

Green eyes met hers, unintimidated.

“No. *No*. Look at you, you can hardly stand. Go back to bed. You need rest—”

Through it all the woman’s gaze never wavered. If anything it grew harder, as flinty as any Roman’s. She shifted tactics, chose something gentler. “Gabrielle, I’m fine. You’re not. You’re better off here where the healers can keep an eye on you.”

The Leopard closed the distance between them. That she had no desire to stay was unmistakable. Still, the Conqueror had to try. “You don’t understand. Court is tedious and exhausting on the best of days. You’re still weak—”

Wrong thing to say. The Leopard set her jaw, squared her shoulders out of pride. If the motion caused her discomfort, she hid it. The Conqueror shrugged. “Fine. But I don’t have time or patience to deal with you if you can’t keep up, understand?”

With a solemn nod, the gladiator clutched the remains of her tunic to her chest and followed the Conqueror back to her chambers. First order was a bath; sharp scents of sweat and blood and burned flesh swirled around the gladiator, innocuous enough to the warlord’s senses but hardly appropriate for a slave in the court of the Conqueror.

Cloudy water filled the tub, remnants of the aborted bath. Again the Conqueror got in first. The cool stale water wasn’t particularly pleasant. All business, she worked the morning’s perspiration from her skin with quick efficient strokes.

The bath must have stirred memories for the slave as well. Her brow creased. “What if the assassin isn’t an Amazon?”

Something in that tone made her instantly wary. “What makes you say that?”

The gladiator studied the pattern of marble tiles on the floor. “I’ve just been thinking...if she needed to get close to you undetected, wouldn’t she have worn something less...Amazonish?”

“She wanted to make a statement.”



“*Somebody* wanted to. Everyone knows you hate Amazons. Dress a girl in doeskin and tell her to shoot the Conqueror and anyone can guess who’ll be blamed.”

She bristled. “What are you getting at?”

The slave took a deep nervous breath. “Everyone has their weaknesses. Maybe someone is trying to manipulate yours. *Trying*,” she emphasized quickly at the sharp look. “Not succeeding.”

She forced long steady breaths through her teeth, resisting the urge to raise her voice. “I don’t have weaknesses.”

The gladiator stood conspicuously out of arm’s reach. “It is wise not to show weaknesses, but pretending they don’t exist is dangerous.”

A vein pulsed on her temple. “Sharing wisdom from years of political scheming?”

The head turned soberly. “A fact of combat, nothing more.”

She itched to lay whip to the slave for impudence, if only she could detect any. The slave sounded almost apologetic, as if stating the obvious to someone who already knew better. Which she did. She stepped out of the bath, gave herself time to calm down while she towed dry. “Alright. If she’s not an Amazon, who put her up to it?”

The gladiator considered, one hand awkwardly working the ruined tunic from her shoulder. “What about Caesar?”

The Conqueror snorted. “And you say I have weaknesses. Not all bad things come from Caesar.”

The Leopard’s cheeks grew hot. She let her suffer for a moment, choke on the bitter pill of her own reasoning, then smirked. “Dangerous as he may be, I find Caesar less troublesome than others less ambitious but closer to home.”

As surely as deft hands tucked the damp towel tight around her body, they unwrapped the bandages from the Leopard’s shoulder, turned her into the morning light to see. The mouth of the angry blackened wound stretched wide in a wicked grin.

She set her jaw, about to order the gladiator to bed—

The slave turned away, eased herself into the tub. The water grew murkier with scrubbing.

Willful thing. “That wound needs to heal.”

She couldn’t see the woman’s face as the injured arm gingerly washed the other, guessed the slow strokes masked pain. “I’ve had worse. What about the girl?”

“I suppose you want me to interrogate her.”

The head turned ever so slightly. Softly, “My wants are irrelevant. You will do what’s best for Greece.”

“Ha. Don’t tempt me. *This* Greece would like to see her hide on my next saddle.”

The gladiator clenched her jaw, set to work scouring under the collar. “Fine. Flay her. Just find out who sent her first.” She found the shift in tone jarring, ridiculously tender one moment, supremely ruthless the next, two incompatible psyches sharing space in one entirely intractable head.

She took the sponge, dipped it in the clouded water to rinse the shoulder. White knuckles clenched the edge of the tub, twitched soundlessly with each dousing. The Conqueror moved to face her. “Why are you doing this? You need rest. You’re no good to me like this.”

Abruptly she stood, reached for a cloth. “I can still fight.”

“Fight? You can hardly move.”

“It’s just stiff.”

“You get in a fight with that shoulder and you’ll hurt it worse, maybe permanently.”

The gladiator rolled her shoulder awkwardly, her face stubbornly still if faintly pinched. “I’m fine. You said if I was going to make the decisions of a leader, I needed to act like one. I just want to hear the girl’s side of the story.”

“This is about her? Or your beloved Amazons?”

“They’re not my Amazons,” muttered the slave.

“Then why?”

She watched the woman struggle with an answer. “What I did to Melosa...I’m just trying to put it right.”

She took the young face in an unkind grip. “Melosa is no longer your concern. Nor Caesar. Your only concern is me. Is that clear?”

The Leopard swallowed, then threw off her hand. Her voice, her whole body shook with anger. “You know I serve you. But if there’s a way to serve you and end this war, I will find it.”

Such words spawned instant anger. But she said them with such earnest intensity that the warlord blinked, suddenly chilled by a sensation she hadn’t felt in years. Admiration. And fear. That she ever considered the gladiator an amusement or a pet to be tamed was a dire mistake.

She was a river, willful and uncontrollable. So learned the Roman officer who first owned her but was enslaved by her words. So learned Caesar, thwarted by her silence and her conviction. So learned the senator, whose abuses couldn't shatter her spirit. Such a soul and the Conqueror could not coexist. A familiar voice whispered in her head, sure and seductive. *Kill her. Kill her now, or she will destroy everything you've created.*

So strong was the compulsion that her hand even reached for a non-existent sword. And yet she made no other move, trapped in the woman's eyes.

"Are you alright? Xena?"

In that moment, staring at the slave, she heard the whispers of the Fates. She couldn't kill her. She didn't want to. Bellerophon was right. She served the gladiator as surely as the gladiator served her.

Poison bubbled up from her stomach. She pushed it down violently, closed her eyes against the acrid gas searing her nostrils. "I'm...fine. We'll go see the girl, ask some questions. But after that I have Court, and I have better things to do than look after a slave. You understand?"

"Yes."

A simple word loaded with so much feeling. For a moment she almost believed everything would be okay, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

She felt anything but fine as she dressed. The sharp pain in her gut persisted, drained her of color and energy. Will alone dulled the knifing in her abdomen, schooled her face into the usual bored expression. Anything else would arouse suspicion. The gladiator also kept her suffering private, rebandaging the shoulder and concealing it under the generous fabric of a milk white tunic laid out for her. But those sage eyes occasionally jumped the distance between them, seemingly indifferent glances colored by worry.

Xena drew the slave to her with a crook of her finger. She locked the familiar manacles on her wrists, fussed with the linen hanging from her shoulders, tugged gently at the collar's half-ring to bring it in line with the hollow of her throat. A thumb brushed the bruises darkening around her eyes. "Someday you will attend me without looking like I beat you within an inch of your life."

Her small hands smoothed the cord fasteners on the exotic Egyptian dress. "And ruin the Conqueror's reputation? I would sooner bleed by my own hand."

She wanted to laugh, if only the gladiator laughed with her. The smile faded as the gaze drifted up to meet hers. In them she found neither lie nor boast. Only surety.

Like a river. Unchangeable. Inexorable. Relentless. Irresistible.

*You are lost.*

## 37 Interrogatio

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### Interrogation

Increasingly harrowing images occupied the gladiator's thoughts as they neared the dungeon. As much as they'd spoken about questioning the girl, she had no idea what the Conqueror planned to do. She kept seeing Melosa, every bone broken, back shredded by the cat-o-nine, face bathed in blood. And in some dark recess of memory better left unvisited echoed other lashes, her own flesh puckering at the kiss of the whip.

The more she thought about it, the less she wanted to know what skills her owner possessed.

She almost ran into the Conqueror who stopped abruptly, staring into the cell.

The assassin lay face down in sticky red straw.

The guard hustled out to meet her, began fumbling with the key even before he noticed the unmoving prisoner. In his sudden panic he didn't seem to recognize the gladiator, though she remembered him, the bowl man from her previous visit.

The moment he unlocked the door the Conqueror shoved past him, crouched down beside the unmoving form, turned her over.

Like Terreis, her face was nearly unrecognizable under a plowed field of interlaced furrows. Unlike Terreis, one deeper gash grinned under her chin, flooded her unmoving chest with red.

A strange voice rattled from the warlord's chest, thin and hollow. "Detain that soldier."

Before her words registered in his mind, the Leopard snatched his sword from its scabbard, brandished the heavy thing with both manacled hands. He had the look of a man trapped, eyes gone glassy with fear. For his sake she hoped he didn't try anything rash. She didn't have the strength to wrestle him, the energy to chase him down. If he bolted, she'd stop him at the point of the sword.

To her relief, he offered no resistance.

The Conqueror let go of the girl's face and stood, disgusted. She took the blade from the gladiator's hand. "Go get Demetrius."

She swallowed, dashed up the stairs and across the courtyard. A cool wind stirred the dust, brought with it hazy clouds from the sea that dulled the sun. She shivered, ducked into the well-trod stairwell to the infirmary.

The healer rested on a cot. Her urgent shaking woke him.

"What? What's wrong?"

She didn't answer, dragged him out of bed and hurried back, hardly waiting long enough for him to grab a satchel.

A sickly groan drifted up the entrance. She ducked into the passage in time to see the soldier drop to his knees, doubled over from a punch to the gut. No, not a punch. Pink ropes bulged between his fingers. The Conqueror grabbed him by the tunic, dragged him deeper into the passage. Gladiator and healer stood rooted to the stairs, the healer's look of horror reflecting the discomfort in her own belly. Reluctantly they followed her to the room at the far end of the dungeon.

"Demetrius, good," she acknowledged casually, hefting the soldier onto the table like a downed stag. "See, Phavo, salvation is just a few steps away. Answer my questions quickly and you may live through this." She tied him to the table, plucked a talon-like knife from the wall, cleaned under her fingernails with the wicked point for effect. The soldier moaned.

The healer stepped in. "Mistress, please."

A Medusa stare stilled him. "You may wait outside until I call for you." Demetrius chewed on his tongue, offered a stiff bow before leaving the room. Her focus shifted. "And you? Do you want to leave, too?" She raked the Leopard with a sneer. *You said you wanted an interrogation.*

The gladiator pulled inside herself under that withering gaze. Yes, she dreaded what might come next. But leaving meant running, hiding from what had to be done. The Leopard did neither. If Xena could do it, so could she.

Strange emotions played across the warlord's face, surprise chief among them. The Conqueror's mask slipped back into place, a scathing smile promising games the soldier would not enjoy. She'd felt that look before, shuddered for the man.

The Conqueror leaned in, the tip of her curved blade tracing across his face, hooking under one nostril. "Tell me, Phavo. Who killed my prisoner?"

He sucked in a breath, squirmed away from the blade. "Your torturer, Conqueror."

She ripped through the side of his nose, earning a yelp. "I need no torturer. Try again."

Desperately, "He bore a key, showed your seal."

"What did this phantom look like?" The sharp edge drifted, lay a shallow seeping line from the bridge of his nose to his jaw.

He whimpered. "I...I could not see his face. He wore the hood of an executioner."

She ripped him open from temple to mouth, baring teeth through the bloody gash. The gladiator hissed under her breath, forced herself not to look away.

“Wrong answer, Phavo. Let’s start again.”

“No, please, Conqueror. I speak the truth. I would never lie to you. Please.” He sobbed, shrank away from the blade that hovered just in the crease of his jaw. If the Destroyer heard him, her expression gave no sign. She smiled as the tip traced the back of his ear, her mind elsewhere, on the next cut, the next scream, the next drop of vengeance to quench her anger. This wasn’t interrogation. This was pure, pleasurable vengeance.

She pushed away from the wall, forced herself closer, onto the stage of pain with the primary players. The Conqueror had warned her about interfering again. She didn’t dare touch her, didn’t dare speak on his behalf. Tender as the Conqueror had been earlier, she wasn’t so certain of the nature of their strange relationship to believe she wouldn’t end up on the table in his stead. But she couldn’t stand by and do nothing. She pressed against the table’s edge, into the Conqueror’s awareness, willing the warlord to look at her.

Death looked back, ravenous, eyeing a new snack.

She refused to flinch. She’d learned that years ago. She didn’t challenge, either, or beg. She just looked at Xena, the way Xena had looked at her at the crucifixion. Intent on strangling the Egyptian, she had blocked out all thought, all feeling, all sensation but the feel of the chains pulling on her wrists, the squirming thing in her arms. He wasn’t human. Neither was she.

Until the Conqueror’s touch had wormed its way into her awareness, that and Xena’s eyes, blue and calm and very human. Slowly the world had returned. She was not Caesar’s weapon, unfeeling and deadly, but flesh and heart and mind and spirit. Sickened, she’d shoved him away, grateful for the reminder.

She offered that same reminder now, looking into the Conqueror’s monstrous eyes. *This isn’t you. You don’t have to do this. You can choose not to do this.*

The rage churned and ebbed, slowly retreated once more behind hooded eyes. The Conqueror stepped over to a bucket, plunged into its depths gory hands and set to scrubbing. If she noticed the flecks of blood on her face, she didn’t show it. “Demetrius.”

The healer entered, checked on her subject, muttering oaths under his breath that would make a sailor blush. “You, girl, give me a hand.”

The Leopard snapped back to the table, to the healer working feverishly on the permanently smirking soldier, teeth gleaming through his gashed cheek. At her hesitation he grabbed her hand, pressed it to cover that horrible gash while he worked on the pink ropey innards spilling from his midsection.

“Mistress, I could use your help, if you want him to live.”

The Conqueror’s mouth pulled tight at the edges as she scraped slick ochre from her fingers, nodded grimly. They worked in strained silence over the soldier, until Demetrius wiped his nose

with the back of his hand, left a smear of fluid. “That’s all I can do for him here. I’ll get some soldiers—”

“I’ll do it.” Stonefaced, the Conqueror scooped up the man in her arms, hefted him with little effort and climbed up the steep narrow steps into the courtyard.

Bright morning sun no longer heated the hard-packed earth. For the first time in days, colorless clouds obscured the sun, drenched the walls and colonnades in miserable tones. The gladiator spared a glance at the rigid back of her owner, wondering if the Destroyer of Nations had somehow conjured the weather to suit her mood.

They deposited Phavo on a table in the infirmary, to the barely-restrained chagrin of Demetrius’ apprentice. The Leopard looked away guiltily, was surprised to hear Xena call out tightly, “Ephiny.”

She approached, taking in the stained dress. “Conqueror?”

“When you’re finished, escort the queen to my chambers and wait for me.”

The gladiator glanced sharply at her owner. Ephiny’s hazel eyes flickered from Conqueror to slave, back again with the faintest trace of fear. “By your will, Conqueror.”

The Leopard stared at the warlord’s rigid spine, had to jog to catch up. *Why?* The word pressed against her lips, insistent, but soldiers crossed their path and she bit it back, tried to still the slow queasy roll of her stomach. Questions would have to wait until they reached the Conqueror’s chambers.

But they didn’t ascend the private tower, veered instead up steps into the palace proper. They traveled halls the slave had never seen before, sparsely decorated but opulent compared to servants’ passages and prison walls. Her sharp eyes picked out doors and hallways, mapped turns and directions even as they remained studiously on the small of the Conqueror’s back. They seemed to walk forever before she began to recognize their surroundings. An immense dining hall occupied by one long table. A lonely atrium covered in ivy. Still the Conqueror walked, her long stride eating the distance. The gladiator’s head swam with the effort of keeping up. Two days ago she pulled an arrow from her chest, poured half her blood on the floor before they managed to cauterize it. But this was her decision, and she’d been warned about the consequences of falling behind. Cursing the spots in her vision, she picked up the pace.

“Straighten up,” the Conqueror hissed, pausing outside a doorway. She nodded, struggled to control her breathing, the pounding behind her breastbone. She caught the warlord’s look of impatience and squared her shoulders, forced past the discomfort constricting her chest. Her owner gave her a few more moments, adjusting the tunic to hide the bandage, making no effort to conceal the blood spatters on her own face and dress. With one long exhale Xena’s face went slack, easing the fine lines of tension she’d held onto since the morning bath. She fixed the slave with a gaze of marble before sweeping through the door.

With a deep breath, the Leopard followed.

## 38 Aula

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Court

The room rumbled to life, guards snapping to attention as the Conqueror took the throne, the slave standing at her shoulder. “Vidalis, send in the first business of the day.”

The headservant cleared his throat, pitched it for all to hear. “The Conqueror calls forth Numia, scout of the Third Army in Egypt.”

The doors parted for a lightly-armored woman no older than the gladiator. She bowed, her eyes lingering on the throne. What a pair they must have looked to her, the Destroyer wearing a blood-splattered eastern silk dress and a bone-cold smile, her manacled slave in purest white linen, face purple and swollen with cuts and bruises. She sighed. In spite of the oath to her mistress, she did hope one day to stand beside her owner without some part of her wounded or aching.

The young woman hid her trembling well as she reported on Caesar’s hasty retreat from Egyptian shores. An unkind smile wanted to take form on the Leopard’s lips. She killed it, slipped on a slave’s practiced look of ignorant disinterest.

Through the great hall flowed more military scouts, foreign dignitaries, and minor Greek officials. All bore news, but most brought requests. Money or men usually, occasionally goods or supplies. The Conqueror remained arch, snapping at her visitors for petty requests, showing little patience for delegations that wasted her time with trivial gifts and information.

The slave studied this harsh woman. Was this the face the world knew? In this room, questioning the Conqueror was not tolerated. The objections of a slave here would certainly earn a short trip to the executioner, if the Conqueror didn’t draw a weapon and do it herself. Slow understanding crept in, how lucky she’d been to stand up to her owner and live. That the Conqueror tolerated such impudence at all from the slave became the stranger thing. A warm feeling crept up her cheeks, the oddly pleasurable swell of pride. And a great reluctance to test her benevolence without good reason.

The impatient wag of an empty goblet. Even two hands couldn’t steady her trembling grip; dark liquid sloshed over the side onto the Conqueror’s hand. She caught the hard look, ducked her chin to take a blow. None came.



More faces passed before them, one blurring into another as morning became afternoon. Dizziness crept back in as she stood behind the throne, filling her head with wool and turning her knees to water. Xena had been right; she was in no shape to serve the Conqueror today, endangered them both by insisting on it. She blinked her vision back into focus, shook her head, pinched herself to stay sharp. If she faltered again, the Conqueror might send her back to the infirmary, or worse. Surreptitiously she braced against the side of the throne, stilled the swaying.

Another beckoning of the goblet. By some Olympian intervention she managed to keep it in the cup the second time, started to return to her place, but the Conqueror snapped her fingers, pointed to the floor beside the throne.

This was new. Hesitantly she knelt down to face her, bowed her head. Without the signal to rise she waited, eyes down, chained wrists in her lap, secretly grateful for a moment of respite, dreading having to stand again. A hand came to rest on her back of her neck, absently ran long thin fingers through her cropped hair. She tensed, thrown by the unfamiliar—almost intimate—touch. Clearly the Conqueror wanted to make an exhibition of her prize, but in what way? What reaction did she want from the slave? Resistance and fire? Fear? Meek acceptance? Too tired to put on a show, she huddled beside the throne, prepared to endure the Conqueror's little display.

Slow steady caresses undercut her anxiety, eased jangled nerves and raw flesh. Weariness crept in, coaxed eyes closed. She listened, understanding some of the foreigners' words and not others, until the droning voices blended and washed through her, guiding her mind away from the room, the palace, Corinth...

No. She pushed exhaustion away, pressed up against the Conqueror's palm in an unspoken request to rise. The hand denied her, offered only the maddeningly soothing touch. Was it a trick? A test? She fidgeted, shifted, anything to stay alert.

The hand pulled her closer, lay her cheek upon the Conqueror's lean thigh. For a moment she stiffened, pride grating at being treated like some favored hound. But only a few of the diplomats and messengers even registered the shift, and those that did seemed more interested in the Conqueror's public display of affection than the creature she bestowed it upon. If they'd ever heard of the fearsome Leopard of Rome, they made no connection to the bruised and battered slave the Conqueror petted now. Her irritation dimmed and she faded again, until a random thought gripped her. Was it all an act to give her a chance to rest? She almost laughed at the absurdity of it, except her head felt so heavy, and the leg so comfortable against her cheek. Ears open to danger, her eyes closed, setting mind and body adrift.

The scrape of metal against metal brought her lurching to her feet, deadly warning gleaming in glazed eyes for any man who bared a blade to her owner.

A low chuckle. "It's alright." A light touch on her wrist pulled her back.

The dignitary swallowed. "A gift from the land of the rising sun." Nervously he held up the gently sloping blade for her inspection.

At her owner's gesture, the slave stepped forward to receive the exotic sword. For its length, it was startlingly light and balanced. The workmanship was like nothing she'd ever seen. Swirls traced the edge, red cords wrapped around a carved grip big enough for two hands. It was a thing of graceful violence, like a snake waiting to strike.

The Conqueror stood as she approached, took the blade gingerly to admire it. "This was forged by a skilled swordmaker. What's the occasion?"

"Lao Ma wishes only to honor her esteemed mistress with spoils garnered from the Conqueror's campaign in Japa. And she wishes to renew her invitation to visit our beautiful lands."

The Conqueror didn't respond, absorbed in the craftsmanship of the sleek sword. In an instant, ruler became warrior, light of feet and heart. Chops and slashes split the air, as sharp and nimble as the blade, as fast and ferocious as the wielder. The Leopard gaped. No gladiator or soldier she'd ever met could pick up a weapon and immediately find its rhythm, its strengths and weaknesses with such ease.

One misstep sent the Conqueror stumbling, jarred the assembly out of their amazement with a collectively drawn breath. Instantly the slave took a step, forced herself to hold still while the warlord slowly drew up to her full height, extending a hand for the dark polished scabbard. Only once the sword was resheathed did she murmur, "Greece accepts Chin's gift. We regret that we will not be able to visit the Middle Kingdom in the near future."

Green eyes never left that tensed alabaster face. The Conqueror wouldn't look at her, resumed her seat with the faint rigidity of a body riddled with pain.

The last few visits dragged on. She watched her owner in the edges of her vision, marking every shift in position, every twitch of her hand, every curt order. By the dismissal of the last guest, the Conqueror looked unmistakably pale.

Again the slave took a step toward her, but a sharp look from hard eyes stayed her. "Vidalis?"

"Mistress?" He feigned nonchalance.

"I think I'll retire early tonight. Send a light dinner to my chambers."

He bowed, scurried away. An order from Captain Marcus sent the guards filing from the chamber. The Captain himself didn't budge, waited for the last Dragon to leave before turning to face the Conqueror. He looked as concerned as the Leopard felt, struggle playing in his expression for the right words to broach the subject.

She preempted him. "Take the night, Marcus. Go home to your wife." The gladiator held her breath as her owner pushed up from the seat, steadied herself with a crushing grip on the armrest.

“Are you sure, Conqueror? You don’t look well. Is there nothing else I can do for you?”

A faint smile. “Come back tomorrow. If I’m dead, you and Bellerophon and all the generals can fight over who gets to run this soul-sucking bureaucracy.”

“That’s not funny.”

“To me it is.” But she couldn’t manage a smile, made her way stiffly out of the chamber. The gladiator’s gaze flicked between captain and Conqueror. She hurried to catch up with the latter.

Questions buzzed in her head, niggling concerns suddenly grown too large to ignore. Again she held her tongue as they walked halls peppered with soldiers and servants and slaves. The Conqueror offered no opportunity to talk, barreled toward the royal chambers with a slightly weaving gait, rigidly upright, looking at nothing and no one as they passed. She fought the urge to steady her, to scream “Stop,” make her sit down, ask her what was wrong. The Conqueror gave no indication she wanted any of those things, so the slave tucked her chin and kept her eyes locked on the floor. A secret prayer of thanks fell from her lips when they left grand hallways for the private corridors to the royal chambers.

At the scuff of a sandal the Leopard surged forward, caught the Conqueror’s elbow before she fell. Alone in the narrow passage, safe from prying eyes, the slave slipped her uninjured arm around the thin midriff. She half-expected a protest. Long moments filled with the rasp of tight breaths and no argument.

“Come on,” she coaxed. “Not far now.”

The head lifted, the dark curtain parting for a drawn face. Athena’s mercy, the woman looked a companion to death. But a grunt got them moving again, one foot before the other.

Her burden grew heavier with every step, bones turning to lead under softening flesh. Her thighs burned with exertion. At the base of the stairs the warlord doubled over, expelled dark wine and watery bitterness upon the steps, her dress, the slave’s feet. Jaw set against the impulse to gag, she held beautiful black tresses away from the ghastly face while the Conqueror retched.

“Gods. Xena, what’s wrong? Is it poison? The infirmary—”

“No. Bed.”

It was an order. The gladiator nodded, heart pounding so hard she could hardly think. Braced under one arm she jerked up, rising by inches to stand, the strain sending searing pain through her shoulder and ribs. Mounting the first step took long moments of struggle, led to another step just as daunting. The Conqueror’s efforts faded, each rise more difficult to scale.

“Please, Xena. I can’t do this without you.” The appeal fell on deaf ears; one of the warlord’s knees buckled, brought them crashing to the stone steps. She tugged on the arm to haul her up,

found it limp. “Xena?” Her quivering fingers brushed the Conqueror’s hair aside, wiped filth from her cheeks and lips. “Xena?”

Her fingertips came away slippery and red. Blood.

A shaky exhale. Numb legs backed away. One step, two.

She ran.

## 39 Coites

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### Convergence

The guards lingered in the courtyard, spoke in low tones. She hid in the doorway, heart threatening to crack open her chest. Precious moments of filtered grey light trickled away, remnants of Apollo’s ride. Should she wait? Was staying out of sight more important than moving quickly?

She crouched low in the shadows, unseen by the soldiers as they parted ways. Even in the failing light, one bore an unmistakable scar. She counted to five, before skulking out of the doorway under the shadow of the colonnade. Quietly she shadowed her old escort, closing the distance.

The moment the others disappeared, she yanked him into the gloom. Instinctively he shoved her away, reached for his sword. She swore at herself for not expecting as much, lunged for the dagger in his belt. A moment later the sword clattered to the ground, Scar clutching the back of his gashed hand. As she snatched it up he drew breath to shout; both blades flicked under his chin, solemn warning silencing him as effectively as a slit throat. She shook her head, her eyes pleading with him. *Don’t*.

They squared off in the shadows, the soldier clutching his hand, squinting at her. “Parda?” His eyes narrowed. “What are you doing out here? Where’s the Conqueror?”

She pressed the sword and dagger back into his hands, dragged him toward the darkened doorway. After a few steps he shook his head. “Wait. Wait a minute!” He shook her off, leveled the sword.

She stared at the weapon, at the soldier, grappled with her own fears. She needed him. She trusted him. “Help me,” she finally forced out past the knot in her throat. “Please.”

He stared, surprised.

She didn't wait for an answer, hurried back through empty halls to the closed door, the narrow passage beyond. The Conqueror still lay on the steps, black blood and wine and fouler stuff pooled under her cheek. She draped one arm across her shoulders, gritted her teeth and tried to lift the woman. Her ribs screamed at the strain, her legs too watery from exhaustion and blood loss to stand. A tiny sound of panic from her throat. She began to crawl, knees and elbows scraping over each step, dragging the warlord behind her.

The weight eased. She sucked in a great gasp of relief as Scar took one arm. "We need to get her to the infirmary."

She jerked her head. "No. Up."

He started to protest, but she pulled them both into motion up the stairs. Several corridors later they staggered into the royal chambers. The gladiator made straight for the bed, lowered her to the mattress with as much care as her tired arms could muster.

The soldier lit a candle, brought it close for a better look. "What happened?"

She shook her head as she panted for air. "Poison, maybe. I don't know. She didn't eat anything—"

"She's dying."

She spun, found the apprentice watching from a dim corner, standing between them and the Queen.

"Help her."

She shook her head. "There's nothing I can do."

The gladiator snarled and launched. Before she could wrap her hands around that fragile neck, the Dragon's arm caught her and dragged her back. Eyes like coals scorched the Amazon. "Help her!"

"I can't."

"You lie!" Rage drove her at the woman.

Scar held fast, wrestled her back, his shouts to stop only slowly sinking in. He cleared his throat. "Maybe she's just had too much wine."

Ephiny shook her head. "Look at her. Skin and bones, pale as snow. She's cursed, been getting worse for months. Demetrius, her herbalist...they've tried everything."

The Leopard shoved off the soldier's grip and turned away, not trusting the words that wanted to come out of her mouth. A silver pitcher among the refreshments caught her eye. She

poured a cup of water, unconsciously sipped it before taking it to her owner. The cool substance moistened the warlord's lips, dribbled into her mouth. Silently the slave begged her to drink it.

For a long moment, nothing. Then a noisy gulp.

She let out a held breath, took a towel to her stained lips and waxy cheeks and chin, wiping them clean of vomit. The exquisite silks reeked, but no matter how sick she was, undressing the Conqueror without permission and in front of her subjects smacked of suicide. She pulled up a blanket instead, hoping warmth might find her skin again.

"Parda?"

She ignored the apprentice, stared at the warlord, willing her to hear her thoughts. *Don't leave. Not like this. This is not a warrior's death. This is not the Conqueror's death.*

"You're bleeding."

Her back stiffened at a hand on her shoulder. "Don't touch me." Air cracked around the whisper.

"Your wound's opened up again. It's bleeding badly—"

"Leave it." She couldn't feel it, couldn't feel anything.

The apprentice backed off. "We'll go."

"No," the Leopard croaked. "You stay."

Ephiny's mouth drew in a tight line. Her quiet words shook with anger and fear. "Why? Do you know why she summoned the queen? After hearing what she did to that girl Amarice, I can sure as Hades guess."

"She didn't do anything," the Leopard growled. "And I don't know why she summoned you, but you'll stay until she tells us herself."

A harsh nervous laugh. "Says who? You? A slave?"

The gladiator looked expectantly at Scar. He flexed his freshly-bandaged hand, glanced uncomfortably from the Conqueror to the apprentice. "You can wait."

Ephiny opened her mouth to argue, snapped her jaw shut. "Fine. But I won't stand here and watch you bleed to death."

Her eyes never left Xena. "Do what you want."

She didn't help the apprentice pull the tunic over her head. Her escort cleared his throat. "I'll just...ah...guard the door."

Ephiny's sure hands worked on her for some time, dabbing, scraping, stitching. Only occasional twinges penetrated the sensation that the bed, the floor, the earth shifted beneath her, falling away into nothingness. The room swayed; only the Conqueror's face remained solid and still.

The apprentice caught her when she tilted, steadied her until the feeling faded and she knew she wouldn't pass out. "Told you all this bleeding would catch up with you," murmured Ephiny. The slave knew better. She wasn't the one spinning. It was the world, turned on its ear.

Finished, Ephiny packed up her kit, climbed onto the slave's cot to tuck in behind her sleeping queen. The gladiator sighed, trickled more water down the Xena's throat. Errant drops trickled down her cheek. A knuckle brushed them away, found her skin frightfully cool to the touch. A glance at the Amazons, already lost to Morpheus.

She slid under the blanket, draping her bare body over her owner's. Already chilled, she shivered at the icy touch. Or perhaps it was the foolishness of lying unbidden with the Conqueror. She could almost feel cold blue eyes boring holes into her skull, threatening pain far worse than anything inflicted upon the wretched Phavo. The longer she ignored it, the more unbearable the tingling became until she couldn't help but look up.

Closed eyes. A slack face.

Let her. Let her wake up and be angry. What punishment wouldn't be worth that miracle?

**[Concluded in Part 4](#)**

**Spyrel's Scrolls**  
**[Index Page](#)**

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# Pretium Silenti

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The Price of Silence

By Spyrel

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**Disclaimer:** [See Part 1](#)

**Feedback:** Almost forgot. This is my first fic; if you like it, or even if you read it, please send your comments to [spyrel@yahoo.com](mailto:spyrel@yahoo.com).

**FYI:** To read this story in book formatting, visit [Spyrel's Descent](#).

## 40 Circulus

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Circle

Awareness crept in, of coolness and warmth, movement and stillness, darkness and light. A long inhale penetrated the deeper recesses of her chest. She held it, appreciated the burn of it before letting it go. A weight shifted on her ribcage. Automatically steadying it, rough fingers met warm silky skin, pleasant enough to coax her eyes open.

In the dimness she found a head of hair, thick and blonde and wild, resting on her chest. The gladiator. Her bedchambers. Night breezes through the dark narrow window. Her thumb brushed across the unmistakable pucker of tight stitches on the woman's shoulder, traced a line across the marks of the whip to smoother planes and curves under the blanket they shared. Even in sleep the Leopard's body felt tense, coiled, ready. Still, she'd decided as she listened to hours of audiences



in court that she liked touching the slave's skin, running her fingers through the pale hair, hearing and feeling the unconscious rhythm of another body's breathing.

This was different. She couldn't remember the last time she didn't wake alone, much less who she'd made exception for. Marcus perhaps, in those early days of heady conquest. She rarely allowed it then, for many reasons important to an ambitious young woman proving herself to an army of ambitious men. Now she had nothing to prove, could do whatever she liked with whomever she pleased. Strange that she remained the bed's only inhabitant, only occasionally making exception to scratch the human itch. She certainly never let them stay. Sex was one thing, but lovers had an annoying habit of mistaking privilege for power. Those people usually ended up on a cross. Gabrielle was neither itch nor lover. Like some curio thrust into her hand by a trader, she found herself strangely captivated, yet thoroughly unsure what to do with her.

The form metamorphosed while she mused, breath gone shallow and silent, muscles bunched under a palm now absently wandering across the hollow of her strong back. She caught herself before it wandered any lower. The head didn't raise, but uneasy energy fluttered under the supple skin. The Leopard would leave the moment she let go.

So she didn't, ran one hand through tangled hair to soothe her as it had in court. They lay in silence, the warlord stroking patiently, the gladiator taut in her arms. She was just about to give up when the body in her arms grew heavy, settled against her once more.

She thought the slave might sleep, but the breathing remained measured and quiet. Her arm felt as if she'd swung a sword all day, achy and exhausted, and eventually stilled against the warm body. Sleep pressed in.

The gladiator rose.

"Don't go." It was a request. No, a plea.

Propped up on her elbows, she held still. "You need food."

"I'm not hungry."

The half-truth earned a dubious look. The slave pressed a palm to the hard hollow of her stomach, stirred gurgles and moans and a foulness that burned its way up her throat. She made a face.

"Ephiny says you're cursed." The voice hardly raised above a whisper, as if saying such things too loudly might make them true.

"Cursed?" The Conqueror chuckled, a wan smile tugging at her mouth. "By my own choices, perhaps."

The slave stared at her blankly.

She shrugged and shook her head. "I'm just sick. Tired and sick. Demetrius swears it's nothing a few months' bed rest can't cure."

Some anxiety fell from her face. "Good. If that's all you need, we're already two days along."

"Two days?" She didn't mean to raise her voice, drew a sleepy mumble from the cot in the corner. She dropped it to a hiss. "You let me sleep for two days?"

"Doctors orders. Sca—" She caught herself. "Joxer and Vidalis have been running interference."

She craned her neck. "And what are those two doing here?"

"You summoned them." She chose her words carefully. "After you questioned the soldier."

A curiously sterile way of saying it. As if they'd discussed the weather over dinner. The less wholesome reality grinding through her head dredged up a wave of nausea. She tucked her chin to hold it down.

The slave eyed her warily, held up a chamberpot. She wrinkled her nose, hastily pushed it away. "Gods, how can you stand the smell?"

The slave shrugged. "I've gotten used to it."

She looked down, got another strong whiff and winced. "Ugh. Get me out of this dress."

Candle in hand, the gladiator kept her upright for the short journey to the dressing chamber. She leaned against a shelf, held still on wobbly legs while Gabrielle's small hands unfastened loops from buttons and stripped off the dress. Before the chill could settle in a warm wool robe settled around her shoulders. Her favorite. She smiled that the slave remembered, fingered the worn fabric as the slave cinched her belt.

"How's your wound healing?" Delicately she lay a hand on the bare shoulder, turned her into the candlelight for a better look at the fine stitches.

The Leopard nodded stonily, forced it around as proof.

"Stop. I said stop, or you'll make it worse." Fingers dug in until the Leopard held still. She probed the flesh carefully, tested the range of motion while watching the gladiator's body and face for tell-tale signs. Nothing. No wince, no jerk, no clench, all shielded by carefully crafted tension. The lack of response itself became a clue, like silence in the woods where danger lurked. She sighed, not bothering to hide her exasperation. "Don't do that."

The gladiator glanced up, surprised. "Do what?"

“Act like you’re fine when you’re not.”

“It’s okay—”

“No it’s not.” She ducked her chin, got eye to eye with her prize. “When I ask how it is, I want a real answer, not bravado. I’ve watched too many battlefield injuries go sour, lost too many men. Got it?”

She felt the Leopard struggle, finally nod in reluctantly admission. “It’s...weak.”

“Does it hurt?”

The gladiator wrestled with her answer. “I can still fight with it.”

“Zeus’ beard, what’s this obsession with fighting? You won’t have to fight again until it’s healed, understand?”

Those pale green eyes locked onto hers. “What if it never heals?”

“It won’t if you keep abusing it.”

Gabrielle mumbled something, avoiding her gaze. She hooked a finger under her chin, waited expectantly. The slave sighed. “You said...I’m no use to you if...”

*If she can’t fight*, she’d told Demetrius. Stupid to think the slave hadn’t overheard. A fingertip to those soft lips shushed her. “If we can’t spar, I’ll find someone else. Besides, do I look like I’ll be fighting any time soon?”

The gladiator took in her emaciated frame, shook her head. But she allowed herself to work the shoulder a bit more carefully, let a hint of soreness show. Though the skin puckered angrily around fresh stitches, the wounds seemed to be healing well enough. In fact, yellowing bruises and fading welts said two days of bed rest benefited the slave as much as her owner. A pang of guilt for that.

As practiced eyes evaluated each mark and discoloration, it finally pierced her scattered awareness that the gladiator bared a great deal of skin. All of it, in fact. A titillating vision, even if she felt too out of sorts to appreciate it. Judging by the hundreds of tiny bumps stippling her exposed flesh, the slave had to be freezing.

“Felt like parading around naked today?”

The slave cheeks grew hot. “I...don’t know where my...where you keep your slave’s tunics.”

She stared at the slave. They stood in a chamber full of clothes from lands as far away as the rising sun, more than the Conqueror could wear in a year. “Look around. There are tunics of every color and texture to choose from.”

“They’re yours, not...”

“Appropriate?”

“Mine.”

The Conqueror arched an eyebrow. Damn her eyes if she didn’t buy the proudest, most stubborn slave in all the Mediterranean. “It’s not healthy for a slave to dwell on what belongs to her when it can all be taken away.”

“Even Roman slaves can own property.” The words rolled out faster than the Leopard could pull them back. Her head ducked out of habit, expecting to be hit, but the gaze that burned from under that brow dared her to deny it.

She stood speechless, too surprised to think of a counter, until the moment passed and grew into an awkward silence. “There...there’s a trunk in the back with your things in it.”

Not the words she expected to come out of her mouth. She looked away as the Leopard bowed and went to find them, embarrassed. Embarrassed at not telling the slave where she kept her things. Embarrassed at assuming she might sleep with her in the nude by choice. Embarrassed at being out-argued again by a gladiator who loathed speaking at all.

But it was just her and the slave in a dim antechamber in the pit of night, with no witnesses to her humiliation but hundreds of yards of fabric. To her surprise, a smile crept onto her face.

The gladiator jerked and hissed, stared down at her palm. Immediately her gaze shifted, and she lifted from the trunk a circle of steel and gold.

The Conqueror lurched into motion. “Put that back. Did you cut yourself? Let me see.” Gabrielle held out her hand. Nothing. She took it, turned it into the light. “I don’t see—”

She pulled the fingers back, opened a gash in the side of her hand so fine and deep the flesh didn’t know to bleed. The Leopard blinked. “Sharp.”

As her eyes darted around for a scrap of cloth, she cursed her own carelessness. “That’s the wrong chest. Put it back. Damn it.” In the time she’d looked away blood pooled in the small palm and spilled over the side, fat drops splatting on the floor. She pressed the first thing that came into her hand against the dripping gash, a priceless ermine-trimmed robe from the Northlands.

The gladiator held the ring up in the light, her other hand forgotten. “What is it?”

“A chakram. Make a fist.”

She did as she was told. “A weapon?”

The warlord pushed past her, dug deeper into the same trunk, past leathers and armor for a pouch at the bottom. “Gimme that.” She snatched it away, tossed it back in the trunk. “Sit. Press here. Hard.” As she sat down beside her she put Gabrielle’s thumb in the crook of her elbow and squeezed, produced a needle and thread from the pouch.

The gladiator paled. “Really?”

“I thought you were supposed to be tough.”

The Leopard looked away, too proud to respond, opened her hand. She set to work, ignoring the jumps and twitches the ivory needle drew with each stitch. Gabrielle’s face pinched as the needle pierced deep. “How did you get it?”

“Get what?”

“The chakram.”

The Leopard could be annoyingly single-minded. She ground her teeth, focused on stitching. “Hold still, damn it.”

Her patient winced, struggled not to jerk. “Talk to me. Tell me a story.”

“I don’t tell stories.”

A noise squeezed out and her voice shrank. “Please. It hurts like Hades. Say anything. I don’t care what.”

She sighed, moved the candle closer for better light. “It was a gift. From Ares.”

“The god?”

“The horse trader. Yes, the god.”

When she stayed silent too long, the slave shifted, pulled her knees up to her chest. “Do you use it?”

“Not anymore. Some gifts are too costly.”

The Leopard watched her as she worked. “What did this one cost you?”

Gods, did her questions ever get easier? She thought about it. “My soul.”

A sigh. “Xena, I’m sorry...about the interrogation.”

“Sorry for what?”

“That I ever suggested it.”

Another wave of nausea. She locked it down. “Too hard on you?”

The gladiator shook her head. “Too hard on you.”

Pale eyes narrowed. “Nothing is too hard for the Conqueror.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. But some things might be too hard for Xena.”

The warlord leaned back, eyes gone cold and steely. “If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

Some of the gladiator’s resolve withered under her glare. She found a particularly interesting pattern of fabric to stare at, gathered her nerve. “This face you wear out there, this Conqueror. I think she’s killing you.”

Without thought her hand latched around the slave’s throat, squeezing, so furious she could hardly form words. “You will never...say that to me...or anyone else...again. Understand?”

Teeth gritted, veins bulging in her forehead, the slave nodded.

She let go, head swimming in a sea of emotion. The red rage ebbed to seeping black misery. Gods, she felt sick. The Leopard rubbed her throat, hooded green eyes masking anger and hurt. She could feel them, couldn’t bring herself to meet them. She, the Destroyer of Nations, unable to look a slave in the eye.

“I didn’t mean to do that.”

Her companion said nothing, looked away sullenly.

“Gabrielle, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I reacted—” The lie died in her throat. She knew why. She heard the same voice—the one that begged her to kill the woman before she ruined everything—whispering to her now. *Finish it. Crush her windpipe. Snap her neck.* She sagged. “I’m truly sorry.”

Moments passed in tense silence. Finally the gladiator spoke. “What about Terreis?”

She blinked. “What?”

Gabrielle cleared her bruised throat. “Terreis. Why did you send for her? What’s the plan?”

She sucked in a steadying breath. “I don’t have a plan. She’s not safe in the dungeon. She’s not safe anywhere I can’t keep an eye on her.”

A long exhale. “I could watch her.”

“Not if you won’t defend yourself when she comes after you.” At the gladiator’s shock, Xena grazed one purpled eye with the back of her knuckle. “I leave you in the infirmary for two nights and you come out looking like this? Come on. Either she did it in your sleep, or you let her. Why?”

She looked down uncomfortably. “My first attempt at foreign policy. You said I should start acting like a leader.”

“That’s your idea of foreign policy? Letting her rearrange your face?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “It’s not so bad. I could take it. She needed it.”

“And how’s that working out?”

“She hasn’t tried since.”

“Huh.” The warlord considered. “Think it would work for me?”

The smallest smile crept in. “Maybe.” Her gaze drifted toward the doorway and she sobered. “No. She’d want to cut your face, and then I’d have to kill her.” She said it quietly, almost to herself, left no doubt in Xena’s mind that she meant it.

“Then I guess we’ll figure something else out.” She gestured to the hand. “Finished.”

The Leopard shivered and nodded, examining her work. The wound still oozed pink but the edges of the gash lay flush and tight. “Hmm. Good stitches.”

“Better be, considering how often you get hurt.” She tied a cloth around the hand. “Look in the trunk on your right.”

The Leopard opened it, froze. The stiff leather cuirass lay on top, freshly oiled, the puncture through the backplate neatly repaired. She reached for it, shifted instead to touch other items in the trunk, hesitantly pulled out a white linen tunic trimmed with gold. Her breath caught.

“You like it?”

She swallowed hard, nodded.

“Let me help you put it on.”

She shook her head, put it away reverently. “I’ll save it for a special occasion.” She pulled out a simple red one instead, worked it over her head with help. She ran her hand over the thick wool thread, her face wrinkling mischievously. “Mine?”

“Yours. You think I’d be caught dead in a Roman tunic?”

Even beaten, the Conqueror refused to concede. Her opponent grinned. “Now will you eat and go back to bed?”

She had a look of persistence about her, ready to argue if her owner objected. The warlord smiled. “Fine. A little. And pour me some wine.”

She shook her head. “No. Demetrius said no wine.”

“I don’t give a rat’s carcass what Demetrius said. A life without wine is not worth living.” Her tone joked. Her eyes didn’t. The slave recognized an unwinnable battle and relented.

They sat on the bed and ate without conversation. The Leopard’s silence she attributed to the presence of others, even if they slept. For her part, the Conqueror found her thoughts elsewhere. On the Amazon-hating murderer hiding in their midst. On this faintly tender protectiveness from the reclusive gladiator. On her own gentle permissiveness in return. She felt something for the slave. Trust, maybe? Understanding? Even...friendship? Gods, she must really be ill.

The Leopard caught her eye, looked at plate of food she pushed around, back at her. *Eat*, her lips formed soundlessly.

Her smile felt more like a grimace. The morsels on her plate looked appealing enough, smelled like food ought to smell. So why did her stomach twist into knots?

An olive appeared under her nose. The slave waited expectantly until the Conqueror bit it in half. She popped the rest in her mouth, offered a grape.

A wicked grin pulled at her lips. “If only I could take every meal from the fingertips of a beautiful slave.”

She almost bit her tongue as soon as she said it, earned a sharp look from the Leopard, but so long as she took even a bite, the slave played along. After a handful of food, her stomach finally cramped. “No more.”

When no amount of coaxing changed her mind, the slave put the rest away, brought back two cups, handed one over. She took a swig, almost choked on the water. She glared at the woman, at the cup of wine in her other hand, reluctantly finished off the contents before they traded cups.

As the slave cleaned up, she slid under the chilly blankets. In spite of the all-too-familiar pang in her belly, she felt better, almost...normal. The wine seeped under her skin like honey, thick and warm. She sighed. Between that and the Leopard’s protective embrace, she might actually sleep through the night.

Gabrielle put the cups away, stoked the fire, then lay down on the bare stone floor in front of the hearth.



Xena blinked, opened her mouth to say something, shut it. Of course the slave only slept in her bed out of necessity, out of concern for her mistress' health, for mutual warmth. With the Conqueror recovering and the slave warm, the finest bed in all of Greece would be hers alone once more.

She turned away, curled around a clenched stomach, and ached.

## 41 Hospes Ingrates

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UnINVITED Guests

The stone floor was neither warm nor kind. She napped in fits and starts, shoulder throbbing, any little sound jerking her from sleep. Each time she would lay still, listening for danger, for the warlord, hearing neither. No whisper of her familiar breath, no moans or heaves of sickness. She'd lay in the orange ember glow of the hearth, ears straining, wondering. Was Xena alright? Awake? Gone? Dead?

She'd shift, try to find a position that eased the ache of her stiff shoulder, afforded her a better view of the bed. The lump still huddled under the blankets. She would tell herself that was good enough.

Until she finally woke to silence and worry she couldn't bear. She pushed up, padded around the bed for a closer look.

Even with her face in deep shadow, the warlord didn't look dead. But neither did she breathe with the carelessness of one in the grip of Morpheus. Nervously Gabrielle reached out, feeling for warmth, for a puff of moist air—

"I'm awake."

She jerked, rattled and embarrassed, torn between explaining and retreating back to bed. In the dark she couldn't make out the Conqueror's expression, couldn't tell how angry she was—

"You cold?"

Xena's voice revealed nothing. She shook her head reflexively even as a shiver gripped her. Stupid to lie, when her body betrayed her. She forced a slow nod.

The blankets lifted, warm air wafting past her skin. They held there, open and waiting.

She couldn't move. Inviting as the warmth felt, she shivered at the memory of her last waking in that bed, the Conqueror's fingers trailing up and down her back. She hadn't moved,

had hardly allowed herself to breathe, waiting for the touches to turn insistent, demanding, taking whatever they pleased.

“I’m not Caesar.”

Those words jarred her back to the moment, to a bed and a woman, nothing more. She swallowed, slid under the blankets to lay on her side, wide eyes staring into the darkness, the Conqueror’s warm chest pressed against her stiff back.

Again she didn’t move, didn’t breathe. Through her tunic and the threadbare robe she could feel every bone, every muscle, every curve of the lean body. The Conqueror’s arm draped around her middle and held tight, knees tucked in behind hers. She held her breath and counted, waiting for the touch or sound that signaled a desire for something more. Moments passed, then minutes, until spots of false color lit up the room. Nothing.

The smallest exhale escaped from her frozen chest, and gradually the brambles in her stomach withered. Other sensations slowly took precedence, the shoulder she lay on aching under the tension and weight. She didn’t dare reposition herself, tensed to shield the barely-healed wound. No good. The throbbing eventually pulsed from elbow to neck to rib, until each breath carved a narrow path between necessity and torture.

“You shouldn’t lay on it.”

Gods, the woman could read her mind. Or had her thoughts, so long without voice, learned to translate themselves into a language of flesh only the Conqueror understood, yet another of her many skills?

Xena didn’t wait for an answer, pulled her onto her back, the dark head nestling into the hollow of her uninjured shoulder, the long frame pressed against her side. She stared at the blackness of the ceiling, too stunned to move. Only after the warlord settled into the first sighs of sleep did her own nervousness ease. Hesitantly her hand slid up the bony back, wrapped around broad shoulders. The dozing woman didn’t seem to mind. Still, the very impropriety of it set her on edge. Come morning her owner would wake, feeling better, and realize where she was, what she’d done. The slave knew firsthand the price of embarrassing the Conqueror. Gods, what a mess she’d gotten herself into.

She’d wait until Xena was fast asleep. Then, warm or not, she’d disentangle herself and go back to the floor before anyone was the wiser.

Banging jarred her from sleep. Groggy and disoriented, she squinted against the flat grey light seeping from the window illuminating the bed. The Conqueror still lay in her arms, face relaxed. Gods, what hour was it? How long had she slept?

More banging, fiercer than before. She clambered to her feet, hands already curling into fists before she’d even located the threat. Through the thick door came Joxer’s voice, steady but rising. Someone wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Two pairs of eyes glowed in the predawn gloom. The healer's presence in these sacrosanct chambers could be explained; the Conqueror's enemy and prisoner, not so easily. Another barrage on the door. "You, in there," she hissed, shoving the Amazon queen toward the dark dressing chamber. And to Ephiny, "Send them away."

The Amazon hardly managed to duck out of sight before the heavy doors slammed open, Captain Bellerophon closing the distance to the bed with long angry strides. Ephiny fell in step beside him. "She's not seeing anyone, Captain. She's too ill—"

He backfisted her in the gut, doubling her over without slowing down. In a heartbeat the Leopard leapt between him and the Conqueror, ducking a swing to shove him back, drawing his sword in the process.

He recovered, pure hatred in his eyes. "Who in the name of Zeus do you think you are? I am Captain of the Conqueror's Second Dragon Guard. You will drop your weapon and let me see her."

Joxer hurried forward. "Sir, maybe she thinks you're a danger to her mistress."

"I don't give a damn what this Roman whore thinks. I think she's the danger. I'm placing all of you under arrest for treason."

"Treason?" Ephiny forced herself upright between gasps. "What in Tartarus are you talking about?"

"Conspiring against the Conqueror." His eyes cut to the Leopard. "That's been your plan all along, hasn't it? Get close enough to the Conqueror to poison her while—"

"Poison her?" Ephiny spat. "She's sick, you arrogant ass!"

The Leopard's ears rang with the shouting, too fast and loud to keep up. Ephiny getting truly riled now, Bellerophon bellowing in her face, Joxer trying to keep them apart.

"All of you, shut up."

It was little more than a moan, but it cut through the noise like a hot iron through skin. In the grey light the Conqueror looked nigh dead, her only spark of color the ice blue chips of her eyes.

Bellerophon straightened, snapped a sharp salute. "Conqueror, you are in grave danger."

"Not as much as you are. There will be no more talk of arresting my attendants." She worked her way to her elbows. "Is that your only reason for barging in here, Captain?"

"No, Conqueror. A message from General Marmax. Two Roman legions have crossed into Epirus from Illyria and engaged the First Army. He's requesting reinforcements."

“You come up here to tell me this? Send a detachment from the Second.”

“As we speak, an order is enroute to General Mistocles. However, Persian raids into Greek lands continue to intensify. He’s already reported that his army is spread too thin. It’s doubtful he’ll be able to spare many men.”

The Conqueror scowled, made up her mind in moments. “Get my armor.”

The slave’s stomach clenched, eyes cutting to Ephiny, willing her to say something. But it was Bellerophon who cleared his throat. “Conqueror, the men would certainly welcome your presence, but are you well enough for the saddle?”

“You better hope I’m not well enough to break your jaw for asking. Tell Captain Marcus to get his men ready.”

Bellerophon blinked. “Captain Marcus? Conqueror, I should accompany you—”

“Now is not the time for more of your jealousy, Captain.”

“Conqueror—” He hesitated, uncertain of rest of the room’s inhabitants.

His mistress glared at him. “Spit it out.”

He squared his shoulders. “I suspect Captain Mkkk—”

The soldier choked mid-sentence. The Leopard blinked, her mind hardly registering the flash of silver at his throat. For a surreal moment no one moved, watching the captain’s lips form words without breath. Red shot across the bed covers; both of his hands pressed against the font at his neck as he sank to his knees, mystified.

The Amazon queen stood behind him, chakram in hand, hazel eye glittering.

“What have you done?” Ephiny breathed.

The Conqueror scrambled out of bed, clamped another hand on top of his already blood-soaked one. “Ephiny, help me!” Numbly the apprentice dropped down beside her, adding her own hands to staunch the fountain. His wide blue eyes roamed their faces, found Terreis. She spat on him.

Joxer stirred to life, drawing his sword.

“Get her out of here!” the Conqueror snapped. That shook the slave loose. Before her escort did something rash she grabbed the queen’s elbow, shoved her into the dressing antechamber.

Out of sight, Terreis jerked her arm from the gladiator’s grip, fixed her with a hateful stare.

The gladiator held out her hand. "Give it to me." It took a moment for the prisoner to remember the strange weapon she held. Even as she brandished it the gladiator wrenched it from her grip, shoved her back against the shelves with its razor edge against her throat.

"I should kill you right now."

"Like you did Melosa? I welcome it," she hissed. "My sisters will rise up at my death and rain destruction down on this city."

"Your sisters are dead! The Amazon Nation is destroyed! Or didn't your Regent tell you that?" Angrily she searched for comprehension in the woman's bloodshot eye, found only demented fire. She pushed away, disgusted. "And you know nothing of Melosa. Caesar killed your queen. I just helped her go the way she wanted."

And for the first time, her heart actually believed it. A little.

"He only got what he deserved for this." The Amazon's finger stabbed at her own ruined cheek.

"Bellerophon? I don't believe it. Besides, how would you know? The soldier said he wore a mask."

"I know that voice." The queen's snarl, low and hateful, left no doubt. "The lying bitch sent her own right hand man!"

She launched at Terreis, sent her crashing against the trunks with one enraged punch. "Xena had nothing to do with it!" It didn't matter that the queen was half-unconscious, that someone pulled her back before she could choke some sense into the mad woman. She found herself back in the main chamber, hands and knees still shaking with rage.

"You always had that temper?"

The Conqueror offered her a goblet of water. She took it, struggled to hold it steady, as much to give her hands something to do as drink. She gulped it down, panting a little, eyes glazed, before the warlord took it back with bloodied hands. Automatically her eyes flicked to Bellerophon. He lay on his back, one leg bent beneath him at an uncomfortable angle, the dark pool spreading around him.

Even the Conqueror's iron will couldn't overcome a slit throat.

"I should have killed her," Gabrielle whispered. "Saved you the trouble."

"Nah. Won't be any trouble." Xena glanced at Joxer over her shoulder, arched an eyebrow of curiosity. "So you talk now?"

The question surprised her. She looked back at Joxer, Ephiny, the queen, shrugged. “A lot’s happened in the past three days.”

“More than I imagined.”

Joxer cleared his throat. “Conqueror, what about Bellerophon?”

She grimaced. “Well, he won’t be guarding Corinth. Marcus will have to stay. And I’ll need a new Captain of the Second Guard. The job’s yours, Joxer.”

The soldier had the sense to snap his mouth shut. “Thank you, Conqueror. I meant, what about his murder?”

She looked into the handsome face. The Leopard could have sworn she saw affection betrayed in the Conqueror’s face before it hardened into the usual icy gleam. “What murder, Captain? This was an execution.”

It took the soldier a few moments to understand. “Conqueror, begging your pardon, but the men won’t see it that way. Assuming the Amazon isn’t lying—”

The Conqueror waved him off. “Bellerophon was a capable and loyal captain, but I have every reason to believe he tortured my prisoner against my wishes. Fetch Captain Marcus. Quietly, Joxer. Ephiny, bring Terreis out here.”

Both soldier and gladiator stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “Captain, I believe I gave you an order.”

He fumbled for composure, saluted and left. The Leopard continued to gape at her owner, thoroughly confused.

The Conqueror ignored her, squared her shoulders to face the queen, gestured to the Bellerophon. “Was this the man who visited you in your cell?”

“You know he was.”

The warlord’s mouth drew into a thin line. “I believe he was, yes, although I didn’t know of his actions at the time. By Corinthian law, your vengeance ends with his death. You will not be punished, nor will you seek further retribution for his crimes. He’s already paid a high enough price.”

“And what about the one who ordered him to do it?”

She sighed. “You want to try me, too? Fine. You say I commanded him to torture you. I say I knew nothing about it. Who can attest to my wrongdoing? Call your first witness.”

The queen stared at her, eyes darting to the corpse.

The Conqueror pursed her lips. "I see. No evidence, no case. Charges dropped."

Terreis growled, readying a stream of curses. The Conqueror held up a hand, but it was Ephiny's fingers digging into her arm that silenced her.

"Did you or did you not send multiple Amazons to assassinate me?"

Through gritted teeth, "You know I didn't."

The Conqueror crossed her arms. "I say you did."

"And where's your evidence?" the queen spat.

"I don't have any. Three years I searched for the Amazon, the peasant, the cutthroat who'd testify against your crime, and I have nothing to show for it but a bunch of dead women and soldiers."

"So? What are you saying? You're above your own law?"

The slave held her breath. The Conqueror drew herself to her full height, looking down her nose at the pair of women. A deep exhale, then softly, "Terreis, Queen of the Amazons. You're free to go."

The prisoner didn't move. Words failed her for long moments, before she whispered, "Is this some sort of joke?"

The Conqueror's eyes narrowed. Ephiny quickly pulled the Amazon back. "Conqueror, I'm sure the queen is grateful for your mercy—" she elbowed the woman, silencing her protest, "—but Amazons are still hunted in Greece. How can she leave the palace without being arrested again for being who she is?"

"Fair enough. I declare the war with the Amazons over."

The one red eye narrowed, peered at her suspiciously. "What's the catch?"

"Sign a peace treaty stating that no Amazon will raise a weapon against Greece. And no Greek will raise a weapon against the Amazon nation. A first offense will result in the offender's mutilation or exile. A second offense means death."

For a moment, doubt crept into that eye. Then it hardened. "If you think my cooperation can be bought so cheaply—"

Ephiny stepped in front of her. "Conqueror, may I speak with Queen Terreis in private?"

The Destroyer nodded, watched the Amazon pull her queen away. The slave watched her owner. As soon as the Amazon's attentions were thoroughly elsewhere, the Conqueror's hard look faltered.

"Need to sit?"

A nod. The Leopard eased her back onto the corner of the bed, retrieved a few cold edibles to coax into the Conqueror's stomach.

"You looked better last night," she commented off-handedly.

The warlord waved off an olive. "I wasn't in pain last night. Stuff like this always stirs it up."

The Leopard nodded, feigned nonchalance. "So are you really going to Macedonia?"

A tight smile. "I have to, don't I?"

"Why not send Captain Marcus?"

The fig she offered met the Conqueror's approval, passed between pale lips. "Marcus is a capable officer, but he's no general. He doesn't see the long view, and he won't make the hard choices it takes to win. Most of all, he's not me. The men don't rally around the Conqueror's bodyguard. They want the Conqueror."

She nodded again, studied the barely-touched plate. "So how long will you be gone?"

Her owner didn't answer. Nervously she glanced up, caught the woman smiling at her. "You think I'm letting you out of my sight?"

She snorted. "I wouldn't recommend it. Not unless you want me getting into trouble."

"Exactly. Bring me some parchment."

She did, stood by while the Conqueror drafted the treaty. When it was finished, she held it up to the window, let a faint breeze help dry the ink.

"So that's it?" the gladiator whispered. "That's all it takes to end the war? You say it's over?"

The Conqueror shrugged. "That's all it ever takes to end a war. Two people agree to stop fighting."

"And what about the survivors, people who lost friends and family? These aren't soldiers you're dealing with. Will the Amazons agree to it?"

"They'll do what their leader convinces them to do."



The gladiator shook her head. “You don’t seriously think Terreis will convince them to lay down their arms, do you?”

“I didn’t say Terreis, did I?”

She followed the warlord’s gaze. Ephiny remained calm yet firm as she argued with the queen.

Understanding dawned. “If she can convince Terreis...” The Leopard nodded, impressed. Another thought. “You knew. How long have you known?”

“About the Regent? Not long. I pieced it together after you mentioned their encounter at the games.”

Her brow creased. She’d definitely intended to keep that memory of the apprentice to herself. “I don’t remember—”

“When you were sick.”

“Oh.” She forced a tight swallow. “I guess you never really told me what I said.”

The Conqueror grinned wickedly. “Lots of things, but now’s not the time.”

“Guess not.” She mustered a queasy smile. Across the room the Amazons argued in hushed tones, oblivious to the Conqueror and her slave. “Xena, what makes you so sure Terreis told the truth about Bellerophon?”

That question finally drew the warrior’s attention. Her eyes darted to the pair, back to the gladiator, and in a low voice she said, “Bellerophon murdered the jailer.”

Not the answer she expected. “I thought the jailer died from the blow to his head. A blow *I* inflicted,” she muttered bitterly.

“Everyone did. But when Bellerophon took me to see him, his body was limp. Had he died in the night, he would have stiffened up.”

“He could have died right before they found him.”

“Bellerophon found him. And when I leaned in close, I smelled bitterness in his mouth.”

“Bitterness?”

“I didn’t think of it again until a few days later when I smelled it on your chobos.”

It took her a moment to make the connection. “Belladonna. The jailer was poisoned?” She worked over the implications in her mind. “You think Bellerophon sabotaged the match? Why would he try to kill me?”

“He’s never trusted you, but I don’t think you were his intended target.”

She caught the warlord staring at Terreis, sucked in a sharp breath. “The only remaining witness to his crime. Gods. I nearly did his dirty work, didn’t I?”

“Nearly. But you didn’t.”

“He must have killed the Amazon girl, too. But why?”

“Ah, that’s the question I don’t have an answer to. What would he gain from their deaths?” But before the gladiator could think about that the pair approached, the fire in Terreis’ eye dampened, the apprentice ready to talk. Their discussion would have to wait.

## VI Dominor Graeciam

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To Rule Greece

### 42 Axius

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Axius

Columns of soldiers marched through the market street, a spectacle even for a bustling town like Pella. There could be no mistaking the dragon inlays on their breastplates, no mistaking who rode the magnificent bay mare at the center of the mounted troop.

There was a time when the Conqueror enjoyed these displays. Whether they loved or hated her, all trembled when the Destroyer of Nations passed by. Gradually she stopped seeing people, just resources. The best soldier-stock to fill her depleted ranks. The richest merchants to fund her campaigns. The most skillful metalworkers to reequip her armies. The most beautiful sons and daughters to grace her bed.

But even those days were long past; now she saw only assassins. A farmer gripped his hoe more tightly. A shopkeeper ducked into a doorway and out of sight. A scullery maid reached into her robes for gods knew what. The thwip of a bowstring made her spin in the saddle. Nothing. Just the snap of a tassel in the breeze.

Fresh acid filled her guts. She hid the grimace with a scowl.

As the formation came to a halt, an older man wove through the bystanders, fastening tarnished armor as he approached her, snapped a salute. "Conqueror. Your scouts told us of your arrival."

She didn't bother to dismount. "Are the supplies ready?"

"Almost, Conqueror. But it's late in the day. Surely we could host you for a night, have the supplies ready by morning?"

"Absolutely not. We have too much ground to cover before nightfall. How much longer?"

"By your will, the supplies are ready to go, but the horses..." He licked his lips as if sampling something distasteful. "There are barely enough horses in all of Pella to form your wagon train. I've sent off to some of the neighboring precincts for more, but not all of them have reported back."

Cold eyes bored into him. "Your protectorate sits at the heart of the most fertile lands in Macedonia, perhaps all of Greece. You're telling me there aren't even twenty plow horses, mules, and donkeys within a few hours ride?" She glared at the onlookers now, ungrateful leeches, withholding from their ruler and protector—

A squeeze on her ankle. Out of the corner of her eye a tousled blonde head, one hand resting surreptitiously on her boot. She worked her jaw back and forth for a moment. "How many horses do you lack?"

"Three, Conqueror."

Three. She looked at the townspeople, thin and apprehensive, at her guard, tired and hungry, her officers...

"Captain?"

Immediately Joxer rode to her side. "Yes, Conqueror?"

"Give me three of your officers' horses."

"By your will." In a heartbeat he dismounted, handed over the reins to his own horse before selecting two others. Those he volunteered glowered at him but grudgingly dismounted.

"How long now?"

The retired soldier took the reins, his uncertainty fading with a genuine smile. "Half a candlemark, Conqueror. Less with help." He saluted and hurried away. Joxer barked at the dismounted soldiers, led the way after him.

Then it was just her, her guard, and a town full of nothing but trouble. Her gaze landed on one of the young officers nearby, leader of the contingent Captain Marcus insisted on sending with her. "Lieutenant Pelagios, march these men down to the river for a short rest."

She followed the Dragons to the riverbank, continued a little further upstream until the nearest soldier was out of earshot. Only then did she dismount, slowly and with effort, still recovering her strength. Firm hands eased her down.

“Thank you.”

Gabrielle nodded, rummaged around in the saddle bags until she located a loaf of bread, broke some off for both of them.

They sat in silence, nibbling on the bread and sipping water from a bladder as they watched the river run.

“How’s the shoulder?” she asking, cringing inwardly at making small talk.

The Leopard nodded, rolling her shoulder with relative ease as proof. Not as if the Conqueror hadn’t been tracking her gladiator’s progress. She’d watched her stretch and work the shoulder when she thought no one was looking, noted fewer grimaces with each passing day.

Still, it was not the reply she hoped for. She tried a different tack. “You think they’ll make it safely back to Amazon lands?”

The trireme had hardly pushed sand before the queen and her regent left the landing beach in haste. Some part of her did wonder if all the effort had been for nothing, if some overzealous bounty hunter might try to cash in on a reward he didn’t know no longer existed.

The Leopard stared into the river. After some consideration, she shrugged.

Precious moments ticked by. The Conqueror sighed. “Are you going to say anything?”

The slave’s gaze dropped, her expression opaque. Since the landing in Macedonia, she’d been particularly withdrawn, the hand to her heel being their first communication all day. Even now the slave seemed not to have heard her. At the brush of the back of her hand against the muscled forearm, the Leopard blinked, drawn out of her thoughts. “Like what?” she husked.

“Don’t know. Don’t care. I just...miss talking to you.”

The admission stung, as if saying it out loud gave it substance, gave the slave even more power than she already had. But the warlord couldn’t deny the truth of it. A day of hectic preparation and two days’ travel crammed on the open deck of a tiny trireme with a hundred crack soldiers afforded no privacy. Though they’d been together every moment of every day, she ached for the gladiator’s company.

“I think they’ll make it back.” The slave pulled her knees to her chest, resumed her survey of the water. A sinking sun bounced off the rippling surface of the water, stippled her face with light. “Is this the Axios River?”

The question surprised her, but she nodded. "Why?"

Gabrielle shrugged. But after a few moments, words began tumbling out. "Long ago the god of this river, Axios, had a grandson named Asteropaios, a gifted warrior who could fight just as well with his left hand as his right. He could even throw two spears at once with deadly accuracy. Unfortunately, Asteropaios had just arrived in Troy for a visit when Agememnon's thousand ships lay siege to it.

"When Patroclus died by Hector's hand, Achilles flew into a rage, slaughtering Trojans left and right and throwing the bodies of the slain into the river Scamander, so many that the river choked on the corpses. The river god begged his brother Axios' grandson to put a stop to it. Amidst the panic of Achilles' assault, Asteropaios alone made a stand, throwing two spears. While the great Achilles deflected one with his shield, the other grazed his arm. Axios' grandson was the only warrior in all of the Trojan war to draw blood from Achilles. But in the end, Achilles killed him, too. Enraged, Scamander flooded over his banks and almost drowned Achilles, but just at the moment of his triumph, the god Hephaestus interfered and dried up the river with a single massive flame."

The gladiator lapsed back into silence. The Conqueror stared at her, as she had almost from the moment the story began. Finally she found her voice. "Where did that come from?"

Her slave flushed crimson. "Just a story I heard once."

Once? The woman had the memory of Kronos.

She glanced up, embarrassed. "Did you like it?"

The warlord thought about it. "Well, your storytelling skills are atrocious. The ending is abrupt, anticlimactic, and completely unsatisfying. But it's got rage, vengeance, lots of fighting...yeah, I liked it. Was there a point?"

"No, not really." She stared at the river, eyes unfocused. The Conqueror thought her gone again, but in time she spoke. "Asteropaios fought out of a sense of duty to his family, where Achilles fought out of his love for Patroclus. And Achilles was killed in the end by Paris, who fought out of love for Helen and Hector and all of Troy. Love was the deciding force. So yeah, I'd say the point was, 'If you have to fight, fight for love.'"

The Conqueror laughed. When the slave glared at her, she wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "No, it's good. You just surprise me, that's all. I never figured you for a romantic."

"I'm not," the Leopard gruffed. She'd clearly struck a nerve, though, and the conversation ended just as suddenly as it began.

She couldn't stand it anymore. "Alright, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," murmured the gladiator.

“Then why the sullen look?”

The Leopard pulled at the grass, eyes down, reluctant to answer. “Xena, you shouldn’t be seen talking with a slave.”

She leaned back, smarting from the slave’s distance. “Who’s looking that dares question what I do?”

“Your guard. The people of Pella. The First Army. The Romans. Especially the Romans.”

“There are no Romans here.”

“You don’t know that. There could be spies here, scouts. If we don’t meet them here we certainly will later. You said you can’t let people think a slave influences the Conqueror’s decisions.”

Her hackles raised at the words thrown back in her face. “I’m the Conqueror. I can do as I please.”

“You can’t look weak. Especially not now when you’re not at your strongest. Not in front of a Roman general and his men, who already think a woman leading an army is a joke, much less a woman leading a country.”

The Conqueror’s face went flat, a warning to anyone who knew her. “You calling my leadership a joke?”

The Leopard bit back exasperation. “You know I’m not. But they have no respect for softness or compassion. They consider them weaknesses to be exploited—”

“Don’t lecture me on Roman values. You’re not the only one with a harsh education, remember?” Angry as she was, her voice remained unusually even. To her surprise, the gladiator’s mouth snapped shut, the fight gone from her eyes.

“I’m...worried, that’s all.”

Worried nothing. Keen ears heard the quiver in her voice, sharp eyes detected the shake in her fidgeting hands. The Leopard had spoken of fear only once before. “That’s what this is about? The Romans? Gabrielle, I will never let them harm one hair on your head.”

The Leopard winced. “I’m more concerned about the hairs on your head. Why are you doing this? What difference will a hundred men make against eight thousand legionnaires?”

“A hundred men and the most famed warrior Macedonia’s seen since Alexander,” she corrected, smirking.

“Xena,” the Leopard growled. “Right now you look like a walking corpse. Not very intimidating.”

“I know what I look like. But I don’t have to intimidate eight thousand men. I only have to intimidate one Roman general.”

The gladiator thought it over. “Then make it convincing. Chain me. I’m sure as Hades not wearing this collar to keep my neck warm.”

Her brow furrowed. “Now? We’re at least a week’s march away.”

“And Caesar has eyes everywhere, and I haven’t killed you yet.” The sage eyes glittered, bright and fanatical. “Bind me, or so help me Ares I will try to kill you again.”

And under the threat she heard it, the tremor of desperation, and suddenly understood. “You’re afraid you’ll actually succeed.”

In the Leopard’s eyes she found real pain. “You asked me once if I would kill you. I didn’t answer because I didn’t know. And I don’t ever want to find out. Don’t make me find out. Please,” she whispered, offering her wrists.

The warlord studied her face, searching for that tiny glimmer of something—respect? love?—that had always kept the gladiator from doing her harm. She found it, even under that wild look. The Leopard had become her companion, her confidant. The loneliness of the last three days convinced her she didn’t want to go back to the way things were. “No. We’ll think of another way.”

“What other way? You want me to stay. I want you to live.”

“Promise me you won’t—”

“I can’t.” Emotion choked her. “I can’t.”

The warlord was at a loss. “Why? I don’t understand.”

The Leopard’s resolve faltered. With the right words she might abandon this madness, if only the Conqueror were any good at pleading her case. “Don’t do this, Gabrielle. Just talk to me. Make me understand. What hold does Caesar have on you that could convince you to hurt me?”

The slave opened her mouth, shut it again helplessly. Xena cursed herself for not asking before, had simply assumed she’d murdered for her master because she had no choice, facing punishment or death under his tight control. But here, thousands of leagues away? The Leopard hated Caesar almost as much as she did. What could compel her to do his bidding so far removed?

“You’re frightened, I get that. But whatever he’s done, we can undo.”



The warlord reached out reassuringly but the move drove the Leopard back, jaw set. "Choose, Xena." She took another step back. "Restrain me or let me go." She waited for a moment, two. The Conqueror stared at her in disbelief.

The slave bolted.

She gaped, watched her leap into the river, slog into the deeper water before the current swept her off her feet and carried her away.

*Restrain me or let me go.*

The blond head dipped, broke the surface again with a gasp, arms paddling frantically.

"Dragons!" the Conqueror boomed. "Stop that slave!"

She didn't wait to see what they did, flung herself on the mare's back with a strength she hadn't felt in days. By the time she wheeled around, guards were already wading in to intercept the gladiator. The first two missed her flailing form; the third caught her wrist as she went under. By the time her mount waded in two men hauled her toward the shallows. The gladiator stumbled, half-jerked one of them off his feet trying to catch herself. He swore, lay a punch across her temple; the Conqueror held back the urge to kick him in the teeth. Finally they stood before her, the Leopard's arms wrenched behind her back, her face set against the pain, sputtering river water. The Conqueror glared at her, truly angry. Moments dragged into minutes. One of the guards finally coughed, waiting for acknowledgement to speak. "Shall we brand her, Conqueror?"

She thought about it, let the slave think about it, too. Finally she shook her head. "No, she wasn't running away. She was...confused. Isn't that right, slave?"

Slowly the slave nodded.

She reached into her saddlebags, tossed them the shackles. When they handed the leash back to her, it took effort to resist yanking the gladiator onto her knees. Instead she wheeled around and rode back toward town, forcing the slave to jog to keep up.

"That was particularly stupid," she hissed to the air when they were out of earshot. "You could have drowned."

"I knew you'd come for me," choked the slave between coughs and shivers.

The Conqueror shook her head, frustrated, loathing the role her gladiator asked her to portray. "You want to play slave to fool Caesar's spies? Fine. When I treat you like one, remember it was your choice, not mine."

“Dragons, halt!”

The column ground to a stop, an almost audible sigh of relief rippling through the ranks. The tired gladiator stumbled to a standstill, raised her head to take in the small buildings of a village surrounding them. The Conqueror slid off her horse heavily and followed Captain Joxer into the only inn on the dark empty street.

The Leopard desperately wanted to sit, or kneel, or lay down. Instead she locked her sore legs and closed her eyes, slipped willingly back into the half-doze she'd perfected over the last seven days.

The captain's voice woke her. He barked orders at the guard, sent them scattering in a buzz of activity like flies from a carcass. She watched her old escort, waited for his orders, but he passed by without a glance. Soon the street was almost deserted but for the bay and the slave leashed to her saddle. Her owner was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, you,” barked a boy of hardly a dozen summers. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “The stables are this way.”

She cocked her head, some heat rising in her eyes. But the boy didn't know any better, waited to show her the way. With a deep breath she pushed back on the ache squeezing her eyeballs, gathered the horse's reins and ambled after him.

Not that she knew the first thing about taking care of horses, a fact which quickly became apparent. The boy pushed past her, showed her how to remove the tack before handing her a brush. That she could do. The boy left, came back with feed for the horse.

“What are you? Some sort of Roman spy? Is that why you're in chains?” The boy eyed the manacles, the length of heavy links from collar to saddle horn, the red tunic and leather cuirass and war skirt and cropped hair. Denying it would only lead to more questions. She shrugged instead.

Of course, boys like him never lacked for questions. “You belong to the Conqueror, don't you? Did she capture you?”

The gladiator smirked, but nodded.

“Did she cut out your tongue and feed it to the crows?”

She shuddered, remembering the little black monsters playing tug of war at her sister's dangling feet, dodging the steady drip, drip, drip from her chin. Her eyebrows knitted at the morbid boy. She shook her head, showed him her tongue as proof.

“You’re lucky she didn’t kill you. Have you ever seen her kill people?”

Solemnly she shook her head.

“They die horrible deaths.” He couldn’t quite contain his excitement, climbed up on the rail as she brushed to watch her imperiously. “I’ve seen her before, you know. A few years back, during the war, her army came to kill the Romans. She came back from battle covered in blood, so much blood that my uncle said she must have been wounded. She wasn’t though. It was all blood of the soldiers she’d killed. She’s amazing. I once heard a bard call her the Warrior Princess.”

The gladiator stopped brushing.

“That’s a neat name, huh? Maybe someday when I’ve joined her army she’ll teach me how to be a great swordsman and then people will call me the Warrior Prince.”

She barely heard him, strained her eyes looking out the window into the darkness.

“I think that’s a fine idea.”

They both jumped at the silhouette in the doorway.

“Thanks for minding my prisoner, boy. I thought she might have wandered off.” The Conqueror collected the slave’s leash, led her out of the stables back toward the inn. He quickly caught up with them, fell in step beside his Warrior Princess.

“Did you catch her up by the canyon?” he asked her, gesturing with his chin back toward the Leopard. “That’s where I saw them yesterday.”

“Is that so?” Her tone remained bland, but the gladiator detected a note of interest.

“Pellas! I’m sorry, Conqueror...” At the sight of the innkeeper the slave faltered mid-step, stared hard at the ground, hiding her face under dirt and grit and rough-cut bangs as they stepped past him, not daring to glance back until they made their way up squeaky wooden stairs. The innkeeper wasn’t watching, too busy swatting at the boy and sending him running off to bed.

The warlord led her to a sparse room, hardly big enough for a narrow bed and a small table with a basin and pitcher. She had to press herself against the wall for the Conqueror to squeeze past her to shut the door; there was barely enough space on the floor for a body to lie down.

Immediately Xena produced the key to the chain attached to the slave’s collar. “Did you think I’d forgotten you?”

The slave’s eyes slid closed, savoring the lack of weight on her neck and back. “I’d wondered.”

The manacles came off and the warlord held her wrists up to the light, examining them for sores and bruising.

“You didn’t mention we were stopping in Scupi.” She tried to keep her tone light.

The Conqueror shrugged. “There’s nowhere else this far north. You know the innkeeper?”

So she’d noticed her fumble. The Leopard rubbed her wrists, as much from the past as now. Her owner watched her, waiting. Reluctantly, “His brother ran the inn back then. He let me tell stories in the tavern to pay for a room.”

“Let me guess,” the Conqueror supplied. “Stories about a so-called Warrior Princess.”

The slave flushed, pushed on. “I’d been in town less than a week when a traveler said Roman troops were massing in Illyria and Dacia. The locals got nervous. I said that was ridiculous, Caesar wouldn’t risk the wrath of the Conqueror by putting an army on her border. Of course, no one knew you’d already invaded Egypt.”

The Conqueror’s eyes remained hooded as she stripped off her armor. “And then?”

The slave took it from her, wariness lurking in her look. “You know this story already.”

“Yes, but your first telling was a little light on details.” Again that smile, the one that said the Conqueror would get her to talk eventually.

She sighed. “Men entered the tavern one night, that man downstairs leading them. They said a Roman legion was marching straight for the village. The people started to panic. I told them the Conqueror was coming, if they could just hold off the Romans—”

“Hold off the Romans? A hundred farmers against four thousand veteran legionnaires?”

“I didn’t know how many men they had,” she said quietly. “And it doesn’t matter. As soon as I suggested it, the men turned on me, called me a spy for the Conqueror. The innkeeper’s brother told everyone they might spare the village if they surrendered and gave the Romans something valuable. I was still trying to figure out what he meant when they grabbed me.”

The Conqueror chuckled. “I bet you cracked a few heads.”

The woman shrugged. “I was a farm girl from Poteidaia. Just because I’d gotten a lucky hit on Callisto didn’t mean I knew how to fight. I tried to reason with them, tell them I didn’t know you from Medusa and wouldn’t be of any interest to the Romans. They didn’t believe me, called me the Conqueror’s whore for spreading your lies.” It still affected her, the telling of it; her hands shook as she worked the ties of the Conqueror’s bracers. “I remember being pushed into the street, crushed in the press of bodies, so many hands clawing at my hair and clothes and skin, pulling in every direction so I felt I was being torn apart, getting screamed at by the same people I’d spent my nights entertaining—”

A knock at the door silenced her. “What is it?” snapped the Conqueror.

“Soup from the kitchen, Conqueror.”

The innkeeper. They exchanged looks, hers tense, the warlord’s questioning. Reluctantly the slave opened the door.

The innkeeper stood there, holding a sizeable bowl. “I brought you...oh.” He looked right through her. “Conqueror, your captain asked me to bring you some supper.”

She stepped up to the door. “Taste it.” Automatically the slave reached for the bowl. A hand stopped her, and a look at her owner found her gazing at the innkeeper, smiling dangerously. “If you would be so kind.”

“Of course,” he sputtered, immediately ate a spoonful.

She nodded, turned away as the slave took the bowl and shut the door. She stood there a long moment, trying to wrap her thoughts around what just happened. A whisper from her lips, so soft even her own ears couldn’t hear.

The Conqueror’s ears didn’t miss it. “Come again?” she asked, sitting down on the narrow bed, her fingers attacking the laces of her boots.

She cleared her throat, forced past the lump in it, “He didn’t even recognize me.”

“The bard he knew probably looked a lot different.”

*The bard.* She hadn’t earned the right to call herself that. She nodded distantly. “I had longer hair then. Wore more clothes. Talked too much. Still...”

The Conqueror’s voice was gentle. “He probably doesn’t even remember it.”

The heart thumping in her chest skipped a beat. “How could he not remember destroying my life?”

The warrior stilled, forced herself to look the slave in the eye. “I’ve destroyed thousands of lives. Trust me. All he remembers is that nothing they tried stopped the Roman army from attacking his village.”

A heat rushed through the gladiator, an anger so pure it turned her stomach. “No. He’ll remember it. I’ll make him remember it. Every punch, every kick, every curse—don’t—”

She shook off the arms that snaked around her, scraped against skin gone strangely raw. The arms returned, remarkably persistent for their lack of strength. The whole affair might have degenerated into a wrestling match if not for the bowl of soup in her hands. She held it still, near

to crushing it in her fierce grip. Ice seared through her chest, made her grit her teeth against the urge to scream, made her eyes sting with emotion.

Humming in her ears. “He played Fate’s part. He brought you to me. Let it go.”

She felt like an old skin on a drum, stretched to the point of tearing. The warlord held her tight, held her together, kept her from flying apart. She stopped fighting, drew long jagged breaths. She hadn’t accepted it. Wouldn’t accept it. But she’d never been able to hold on to that kind of rage. It exhausted her, left her feeling empty. She slumped against the chest, lay her head on the sharp collarbone, let the arms squeeze her like she hadn’t been squeezed in...ever.

The Conqueror cleared her throat. “My soup’s getting cold.”

She opened her eyes, staring into depths of the bowl, unwilling to look up. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?” said the Conqueror nonchalantly, dropping back to the bed.

“That. Just now. That—” *holding, consoling* “—arm thing.”

One boot dropped to the floor. “I felt like it. You have a problem with that?”

Automatically she shook her head no, even though she wanted to say yes. That it got harder every day to remember her place. That it took chains to remind her that the woman on the other end thought of her as...she didn’t know what. Property? A pet? Another soul to fight and die for her? No, there was something else there, some softness and vulnerability she didn’t reveal to anyone else. But she didn’t dare delve deeper than that. She’d already crossed that line once, gotten hurt thinking the Conqueror considered her anything more.

*You are not free!*

The scar under her collar bone twitched. She rolled her shoulders to loosen it, started to hand over the soup, pulled it back. “I thought I’m supposed to taste your food.”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“Why?”

Blue eyes pierced through her. “He’s replaceable.”

*You’re not.* A smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. She wiped it off, made a point of sampling the soup anyway before handing it over. As she turned her attention to the buckles of her own armor, she counted surreptitiously the number of bites the Conqueror took without prompting. Nine, when Xena put the bowl aside. An improvement.

“C’mere.” The warlord waved her over, and she realized she’d been straining to reach the buckle under her still stiff shoulder. She presented it to her owner, exhaled when the thick stiff leather lifted from her shoulders.

“Finish that, would you? The smell’s making me sick.” She gestured at the bowl as she lay down, closed her eyes.

Another of the many kindnesses the Conqueror showed her slave these last few days, hidden under a thick layer of gruffness. The Leopard finished stripping her boots and warskirt, turned on the soup. It hit her constricted stomach like a fist, and she hardly ate more than the Conqueror before she felt full. Didn’t matter. She forced it down. Feeding her slave had hardly been the Conqueror’s first priority, just a few scraps here and there. Who knew when she might get another meal?

When the bowl was scraped clean, she blew out the oil lamp and settled on the floor, her boots braced against the door and intruders. The wooden floorboards weren’t particularly comfortable, but it beat sleeping in her armor on rocks under the cold stars.

“Gabrielle?” The warlord’s voice muffled against the wall.

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

She thought that one over, opted for the most obvious answer. “Guarding the door.”

“Put the washstand against the door and come up here.”

She scrambled for an explanation. “The washstand isn’t very sturdy. I would feel better if—”

“Are you afraid to share the bed with me?”

The question threw her. “I—no, of course not.”

“Do you think I’d force myself on you like your previous owners?”

Her mouth went dry. “I wouldn’t presume to know what you would do.” She immediately regretted it, a spineless answer to a straightforward question. Xena’s silence confirmed as much. She sighed, absently kneaded the scar where the arrow pierced her back, tried to work some pliancy back into the stiff muscle. “I don’t think you would, no,” she finally answered. “But I’ve been wrong before.”

No answer. She bit her thrice-cursed tongue for that last bit.

The wood slats of the bed creaked as Conqueror shifted. “I find your presence...comforting,” she said. “Nothing more. But no one is forced into the Conqueror’s bed. For any reason.” She

rolled away again, discussion closed, but slow deliberate breaths signaled she was nowhere near sleep.

Neither was the gladiator. She lay in the dark, eyes open, staring at nothing but the underside of her own dark ugly fears.

She, like the Conqueror, didn't like admitting weakness. But once exposed, she knew only one way to deal with it.

With the stand pushed up against the door, armor piled around it, and the Conqueror's sword wedged behind the latch bar, she climbed under the covers. She couldn't quite bring herself to press her body against the larger woman's, but she lay one arm on the woman's hip and leg reassuringly. That seemed to please the Conqueror, who settled deeper into the lumpy pallet.

"Xena?" she ventured.

"Hm?"

"I've been thinking about Bellerophon."

The Conqueror said nothing, but the Leopard could tell by her measured breaths she wasn't asleep.

"Terreis swore she didn't send the first assassin. Maybe he sent her. To keep you off balance, isolated."

"Or maybe he just didn't like Amazons, knew me well enough to know an Amazon assassin would lead to their near extermination."

"Why didn't you? Exterminate them, I mean. You could have."

No answer. The gladiator waited as long as she dared before she shrugged. "It's not important. I didn't mean to pry."

"Yes you did."

She held her breath, unable to tell if she was in trouble.

"There are lots of reasons, I guess. Most of them none of your business. The one that matters? I didn't want to exterminate them. In my gut, I knew Terreis told the truth. I didn't want it to be the truth. I had every reason to think it wasn't the truth. But it was."

The gladiator followed the thread. "You couldn't figure a way out of it. That's why you kept her locked up. The Conqueror can't be wrong."

"Something like that," the warlord mumbled.



“So why’d you let her go then? Aren’t you worried the people might rebel if they think you’ve gone soft?”

“You tell me. You like to speak for Greece. Won’t they welcome with open arms this new benevolent Conqueror?” The bitterness in her tone said she thought otherwise.

The slave chewed on her lip. “I find most people treat others as they are treated,” she offered hopefully.

And if half the horror stories of the warlord’s conquests were true, that didn’t bode well for either of them.

## 44 Congressus

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### Parlay

“We executed delaying tactics here, here, and here.” A thick calloused finger stabbed at passes and valleys on the map. “We suffered nineteen killed, thirty-one wounded. Scouts estimate their losses at one hundred twenty killed, more than three hundred wounded.”

The Conqueror smiled. “Well done, General.”

Marmax nodded at the rare compliment. But he wasn’t proud of their accomplishment. “Two weeks’ retreat is hard on morale. I’m glad you’re here. I know the men are eager to go toe-to-toe with these Roman dogs.” By the veteran’s tone, he shared their sentiment.

“Soon, General. They still outnumber us almost three to two. Send a messenger to the Roman general. Tell him you want to meet to discuss what will convince him to leave Greek soil.”

“A bribe?”

“Let’s hope he’s so easily dissuaded. No, I want to see his face. I want to know who I’m dealing with, and I want him to know who he’s dealing with.”

A grin made him look ten years younger. “By your will, Conqueror.”

She stepped away from the rock-turned-war table, watched without interfering as he set his men into motion. The messenger mounted up and rode out of the low forest, across the high mountain valley toward the tiny specks that floated in and out of the early morning mist.

By midday they had their answer.

She toed the slave where she rested against a tree. "Get up. We're going." As the Leopard stood she threw a heavy cloak over her shoulders and mounted up, reached a manacled wrist down to grab her slave's forearm and swing her onto the horse's rump behind her. Strong arms wrapped around her middle. She slammed a common soldier's helmet down on her head, signaled General Marmax and his men to lead the way.

Roman officers met them in the shallow valley between their two armies, eased to a stop well beyond bowshot. For a long minute no one moved. The Conqueror eyed them all in turn, saving the one with the gaudiest armor and plumage for last. Not ostentatious enough to be Caesar himself. She felt vaguely disappointed.

"What's this about then?" barked one of the officers, a tribune by the stripes on his tunic.

"I am General Marmax, commander of the Conqueror's First Army."

"We know who you are," the tribune sneered. "What is the point of this meeting?"

Marmax cut the young nobleman a weathered scowl. "Rome has violated the terms of the Dyrrachium Treaty by crossing into Macedonia. I'm here to discuss with your general the terms of his withdrawal."

A chuckle rippled through the assembly, low and ugly.

"What terms do you suggest?" came the steady voice from the well-armored man at the back of the group. From under the plumed helmet, small dark eyes drilled into Marmax.

"Immediate withdrawal of all Roman units to territories north and west of the Drilo and Drinus Rivers. In return, I put in my report to the Conqueror that this was all just a matter of poor orienteering and recommend against declaring war and counter-invading."

"All very sensible," the Roman replied. "We are sensible men. Unfortunately for you and I, those we take orders from do not share our sensibilities. Especially your Conqueror. I am obliged to say no."

"That would be a mistake." The warlord removed her helmet, waited for them to recognize who sat among them.

The general took her in, the small blonde figure behind her. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Conqueror." Like Caesar, his voice and eyes did not reinforce his words. But she detected in his tone no derision. Only politeness, and perhaps faint respect. Or at least determination not to underestimate her. He rose in his saddle slightly, offered a stiff bow. "I am Marcus Junius Brutus, commander of these legions."

The body at her back tensed, craned around her for a better look.

She cocked her head at him. "Brutus? Not the same Brutus who sacked Scupi?"

“You’ll address him as General Brutus.”

She ignored the mouthy tribune. “Then you’ll recognize my prize, General.” She reached back, shoved the gladiator off the horse unceremoniously. “You two know each other, am I right?”

The slave hauled herself to her feet, her head bowed. The general stared at her, eyes wide.

The Conqueror jerked on the leash, grabbed the collar and wrenched until the gladiator looked up. “I asked you a question, slave. Do you know our esteemed general?”

She already knew the Leopard would nod her head. What interested her was the look in her eye. Anger. Resentment. At her or Brutus, she couldn’t be sure.

“I understand she was once your slave, Brutus. Quite the ornery thing. Was she this combative in your bed?”

The gladiator squirmed. Whether she played along or truly resisted the painful twisting of her collar, her actions made Brutus straighten in his saddle, the corners of his mouth hinting at a scowl.

“Caesar told me you’d purchased her.” He eyed her manhandling the Leopard. “I didn’t realize you’d become so attached.”

“She amuses me. I like to watch her fight.” The Conqueror gave the collar a tug, drawing the squirming gladiator up on the tips of her toes, making a show of enjoying the slave’s struggles. “I can imagine what you liked about her.” Impulsively she leaned down in the saddle, covered the gladiator’s mouth with her own.

The Leopard froze, startled, unable to respond as their lips pressed harder together.

“Fight me,” the warlord breathed into her mouth.

Long moments of bewilderment. Then a fist connected solidly with her temple. She forced out a throaty laugh even as spots swam in her eyes. Gods, the woman packed a punch. When she focused on Brutus again, his cheeks glowed red, and not from embarrassment. Time to get to the point. “So Caesar’s sent you on a fool’s errand in Greece’s no man’s land. What a waste of talent.”

Brutus squared his chin. “Such is the lot of a soldier, to play fool to his commander. Isn’t that right, General Marmax?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Marmax gruffed.

“Turn back now, Brutus,” she warned. “Many more good men will die if you don’t.”

“My men aren’t afraid of death,” he boasted.

“That’s good,” she agreed. “Because my men aren’t afraid to kill them.”

She spun away, rode back to the edge of the valley, the chained Leopard scrambling to keep up. It took a great deal of discipline to rein her horse in, keep him from dragging the gladiator off her feet.

She brought the bay to a walk once they were hidden in the trees. Marmax caught up with them, chuckling. “Did you see the look on their faces? How did you ever acquire Brutus’s old slave?”

“How indeed.” That Caesar sent this general to lead his invasion didn’t strike her as coincidence. As the heat of the moment faded, concern and uncertainty seeped in. She glanced over her shoulder. The gladiator seemed to be holding up well enough. A little glassy-eyed, perhaps.

“He didn’t seem overly concerned about your presence, Conqueror.”

She pursed her lips. “That’s because he knows something we don’t know.”

“Or he doesn’t realize who he’s dealing with.”

She pictured the look on the general’s face when he spoke of the Conqueror. “Oh, he realizes. I’m pretty sure of that. But he doesn’t strike me as the sneaky type. He’s honorable enough. He’ll stick to standard Roman battle tactics so long as he has superior numbers.”

“Shall we convince him otherwise?”

She smiled as they rode back into camp, dismounted at the makeshift war table. “We’ll start tonight. My guards will light extra fires all along these hills—”

The general cleared his throat. “You really are fond of that slave, aren’t you?”

She looked at him quizzically, remembered the gladiator at the end of the leash she held. “Is there a problem, General?”

He chuckled, held up his hands. “No, Conqueror. You just used to be more selective about who you kept around when you discussed strategy.” It was Marmax at his most disarming. His tone held no criticism, just observation. And if he observed enough to say something...

“Captain Joxer!” He jogged over, saluted smartly. “Take this slave back to my tent and keep an eye on her. Send Lieutenant Pelagios to fill in for you.”

He hesitated a moment, snapped his mouth shut and nodded tersely. “By your will.” Disappointment clouded his eyes, but he was soldier enough to follow orders, even unpopular ones.

By the time the Conqueror left Marmax to finish preparations, Helios had long retired below the mountaintops. She started for her tent, stopped. The gladiator. The kiss. A warmth crept into her cheeks, her lips. Not ready to face the gladiator, she spun on her heel, headed toward the perimeter.

Through the canopy filtered the orange glow of scores of campfires, so many it was a wonder they didn’t set the forest aflame. From Brutus’ vantage point it must look as if the whole south end of the valley were full of Greek soldiers.

As if on cue, Pelagios emerged from the brush ahead.

“All set?”

He nodded, caught his breath from running. “Three hundred campfires. The men will be roused for assembly before dawn.”

“And the cavalry?”

“They’ll be joining me on the eastern ridge. We move on your signal.”

“And not a moment before. A lot rests on you, Lieutenant. Make Captain Marcus proud.”

“I will, Conqueror.” He smiled and saluted, jogged on to the next campsite.

She delayed as long as she could, speaking with soldiers she barely knew, checking on preparations better left to the men and women performing them.

Finally she turned, made her way through the maze of trees back to the simple tent near the center of camp. As she put her hand to the tent flap, quiet voices reached her ears.

“...She trusts you. She wouldn’t have promoted you if she didn’t.”

A grunt. “Captain of the Second Dragon Guard, and I still get escort duty.”

“Maybe I’m wrong, but from her I think that’s a compliment.”

“Escorting you versus planning a battle? Right.”

“Joxer, how many soldiers have discussed battle strategies with the Conqueror?”

“Fewer than a dozen, by my count.”

“And how many soldiers have been assigned to escort me?”

A sigh. “One.”

“Two, actually, but I broke Bellerophon’s nose, remember?”

A snort, quickly contained. He didn’t argue any further.

The Conqueror took two composing breaths, parted the flap.

The captain shot to his feet when she stepped in. The slave rose more slowly at the sight of her owner, her leash and manacles heaped in the floor nearby.

Her eyes darted between them. “Captain, come with me.”

She led him outside, walked far enough away where she could still see the tent but wouldn’t be overheard by its occupant. “I have a task for you. You’re not going to like it.”

He steeled himself. “Anything, Conqueror.”

“Tomorrow, your sole duty is to protect the Leopard.”

Predictably his enthusiasm waned. “As you wish, Conqueror. But you’ll be there; I hardly think—”

“No. She’s not coming with me.”

His brow furrowed. “That may be difficult. She fully expects to be fighting at your side.”

“All the more reason I need you to do this. I can’t be distracted tomorrow worrying if she’s alright. I don’t care if you have to knock her out, just keep her here until I return. And if things go badly, Athena forbid—”

He shook his head. “Conqueror, I won’t leave you behind.”

“Yes you will. My last order is to get her as far away from Rome as you can. If I don’t come back tomorrow, I know you, of all my guards, will do this for me.”

He stared hard at her, torn. Finally he dropped his gaze. “By your will, Conqueror. As always.”

She clapped him on the shoulder. “Be waiting outside my tent tomorrow before dawn.”

He nodded, snapped a salute.

One down.

When she returned she found the Leopard pacing, a motion that stopped when she entered. The Conqueror stripped her greaves and breastplate, tossed the pieces next to the slave's restraints. "You gonna take that armor off?"

"Depends. How early are we heading out?"

Guilt washed through her. She wanted to say something, knew the gladiator would argue or, worse yet, do something rash. "Dawn." She busied herself with the knots of her bracers, not turning around for fear the Leopard might see though the lie.

Moments passed, enough to make her nervous. "I'll keep it on," decided the Leopard. "I don't want to slow us down. Did you eat?"

"Yes." Again she didn't turn.

"No you didn't. The Captain brought us some porridge."

She peered at the slave. "What makes you think I'm lying?"

The gladiator sighed. "I can see your belly button rubbing up against your backbone from here. Take it. It's good boring army fare."

She pressed the bowl into the Conqueror's hands, took her own heaping bowl to the other side of the tent and attacked it with her usual fervor.

Xena pushed the mushy meal around, finally braved a bite. When her stomach didn't clench, she downed another spoonful with more confidence.

"So this Brutus...what exactly did you do for him?"

The Leopard paused mid-bite, wary. "I told you. I entertained him with stories, offered counsel when he needed it."

"He never took you to his bed?"

The gladiator fixed her with a cold stare. "I didn't fuck him, if that's what you want to know."

The warlord frowned. "It's not. He just seemed...protective of you."

A grunt as she shoved another bite in. "So protective he sold me."

So the wounds still stung. She nodded. "He made a mistake. Maybe he realizes that. You yourself said Caesar lied to him."

"He could have trusted me. I never told him anything thing but truth."

The warlord sighed. "Sometimes the truth is less convincing than a lie." She tried to imagine a younger version of the woman, trusting and spirited and strong-willed. If the Leopard was this much of a handful after four years as a slave, the Conqueror could only imagine how much trouble she'd been to her first owner.

"What's so funny?" the Leopard groused.

"Nothing," she murmured, trying to straighten out the unintentional smile. "He just didn't understand you. Look how long it's taken me to understand you."

"You understand me?" A little challenge echoed in her smirk.

"Well, not completely, but... Yeah, I think I've got a fairly good grasp of what goes on inside the untamable Leopard's head."

"And what am I thinking now?"

She grinned. "You're thinking, 'This arrogant woman knows nothing about me.'"

The gladiator scowled. "Too easy. What was I thinking when you kissed me?"

The grin froze on her face. What was the slave thinking? Gods, she didn't even know what she herself was thinking. She conjured up the memory, the absolute stillness of that moment. "You were thinking... How far is she going to take this? If I weren't scared stiff right now, would I actually enjoy it?"

The gladiator's smirk faded and color rose in her cheeks, filled up to her forehead so that a vein popped out across her temple. Her empty bowl and spoon clattered to the rug and she lurched to her feet, bolted blindly for the tent flap.

"Gabrielle, wait!" She caught the Leopard's arm, spun her around, wasn't prepared for the fist that followed. Twice in one day the gladiator made her see stars. She didn't let go.

"Did you enjoy it? Taking what wasn't freely given?" The slave's voice barely cracked above a whisper.

Her chest ached. "Gabrielle... I didn't mean to hurt you, then or now. I just wanted to see his reaction. I didn't think you would..." What? React badly? The slave who nervously shared her bed? "I didn't think."

They stood like that, eyes locked, angry versus apologetic. Finally the Leopard pulled her arm free, eyes still bright. "And you call me the stupid one."

"You're right. I was stupid, I should have known better..." Words poured out of her, strange words the Conqueror would never utter. Xena didn't care. "I have no idea what you were



thinking. Probably something like, ‘When I get this insensitive bitch alone tonight I’m gonna pummel her.’”

“You got that right.” But her words seemed to knock some fire out of the gladiator, and after a moment she turned around, crossed the tent to the saddle bags dumped next to the cot. She returned with a salve, smeared it on the still throbbing cheek. “I’d do the other side, but you’ve already got a black eye.”

She’d forgotten. Figures no one would say anything about it. “It’s fine. Thanks.”

The ointment went back in its place and the slave collected the bowls, both empty. The Conqueror moved to the bed, her heart still hammering. Gods, what an ass she could be. And tomorrow... “Gabrielle—”

“I know. It’s too small.” She eyed the narrow cot, barely wide enough for the Conqueror’s broad shoulders. “I made a pallet over here for me.” Shyly, “For us, if you want.”

Their first night of privacy since Scupi. Just the thought of it made her skin ache for contact. She closed her eyes, forced the thought back. “It’s not that. I just need to tell you—you’re not going to like this—I think it’s best if you...if you...” *Stay here while I ride into battle. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to you.* A deep breath. “If you stay chained up tonight. In case someone walks in.”

Pale eyebrows knitted, concerned. “Are you expecting someone?”

She collected the manacles. “Brutus may try something during the night. Or I might need to make some last minute changes.”

The gladiator presented her wrists, an act of trust even if her eyes held questions. The Conqueror gestured her over to the center pole propping up the tent, fastened her arms in front of her around the wooden post. She dragged the pallet to the pole, turned away from the Leopard’s unsettling gaze to blow out the candles and climb into bed. Chains chimed softly as the slave arranged herself on the pallet, then quiet. The sounds of the army drifted around them, whispers, snores, the ring of sharpening stone against blade. The tent walls transmitted the light of dozens of campfires, far too bright to sleep.

“Xena?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you notice you ate all your food? Your appetite’s coming back.”

“Um-hmm.” In truth she hadn’t, too wrapped up in other worries to notice.

“Are you nervous? About tomorrow?”

Nervous? Familiar sensations fluttered under her skin, made her palms ache to have both sword and enemy in her grasp. “No, not nervous. Excited. You?”

“A little,” the voice confessed. “I don’t do well in crowds.”

An ache dulled her enthusiasm. “Don’t worry about tomorrow. You’ll be fine.” *One way or another.*

## 45 Post Aciem

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### Behind the Lines

She startled awake. The tent walls, long dark, bloomed with the faintest hint of dawn, a fact she only recognized by the silhouette it outlined. The Conqueror sat up straight on the edge of the cot, unmoving. Looking at her.

“What’s wrong?” She sat up, suddenly alert.

“Nothing,” the warlord husked. “Go back to sleep.” Beyond the tent, a bridle jangled with the shake of a horse’s head.

“What’s going on? Is there trouble?”

The Conqueror stirred to life, finished hooking on her breastplate and slipped the bracers over her forearms. “No. No trouble. Go back to sleep. Joxer will be outside.”

She watched the warlord sling the battered old scabbard over her shoulder, hook the chakram on her belt. Prickles washed over the gladiator’s skin, the same uneasiness she’d wrestled with all night. “Xena, look at me. What’s going on?”

The warlord avoided her gaze. “You’re staying here.”

“Like Tartarus I am.” Half a step forward and the manacles snapped tight against the center pole, jerked her back to reality. The Conqueror had lied; she’d planned this all along. Anger blossomed in her chest. “Unchain me.”

“You don’t give me orders, slave. Not today.”

She tugged at the chains, found the tent pole unyielding. “Xena, don’t do this.”

“I can’t have you distracting me today.”

“Distracting you? How about fighting for you? Protecting you? Let me go, Xena, wait—”

Through the tent flap she glimpsed scores of men and horses and banners before it fell in place behind her owner.

She grabbed the shaft, shook it violently. It hardly budged in the deep hole dug for it. Her small hands wrapped around the tent pole as thick as one fist, slipping on the smooth wood even before she braced to lift. She threw her whole body into rocking it back and forth, desperate to loosen the lines, the hole, anything.

“You can stop now. She’s gone.”

She ignored the captain, shook the pole with increasing frustration.

“Hey, cut it out.” He reached out to calm her.

She lunged for his dagger instead, turned it to pick at the lock, groaned. The blade was too stubby to fit in the keyhole. She flung it to the floor, fixed him with her most commanding look. “Unchain me.”

“No.” He hardly looked at her, sat down glumly on the trunk.

“She’s making a mistake—”

“She doesn’t make mistakes.”

“If something happens to her—”

“She’s the Conqueror, the fiercest warrior in all of Greece. She’ll be surrounded by a hundred Dragons—”

“Ninety-nine,” she jabbed. “Don’t tell me you prefer watching some worthless slave while the Conqueror of Greece, the woman you’ve sworn to protect, rides into danger.”

“I do what I’m told. Maybe that’s a concept you’re not familiar with—”

“Don’t,” she growled, shook her manacles at him. “Wear these for a while. Then lecture me on how hard it is to do what you’re told.”

“Hey, if you’re looking for sympathy, you’re peeing in the wrong bush. The entire guard knows you’ve got the Conqueror’s favor. She doesn’t ask you to do anything you aren’t already willing to do. How you did it, I’ll never know.”

The Leopard’s stomach lurched. “Did what?”

Joxer rolled his eyes. “Don’t play dumb. How you made her fall for you. I’ve never seen her so sedate. Captain Bellerophon swore you struck a bargain with Cupid.”

“They think she...that I...?” The air in the tent seemed suddenly very thin.

“Hey, I don’t care what you did. Point is, you did it, and the Conqueror knows it, and that’s why you’re here and not with her. It’ll be hard enough for her to win the battle and keep herself safe without having to worry about you.”

Distant horns trumpeted in the distance. Drums answered, shaking the ground. Or was it the stamping of thousands of feet? Her eyes went wide, looked at the soldier.

He cocked his head, listened. “Army’s advancing. Won’t be long now.”

She sank down, a cold knot pulling at her insides. “Bellerophon thought I was a threat?”

“He didn’t trust your influence, no. But once he knew you weren’t an Amazon, he calmed down.”

“Why? Why does he hate Amazons so much?”

Joxer shrugged. “The story I heard says Amazons murdered his father for impregnating one of them.”

“He raped her?”

“No. He married her.”

Thoughts churned slowly in her head. “Bellerophon’s mother was an Amazon?”

“That’s what the men say. The captain never talked about it.”

Whether that was the whole story or there was more to it, she felt the kernel of truth in it. His personal vendetta, the fake Amazon assassins, Terreis’ sworn innocence, the torture inflicted upon her all fit the puzzle. Others pieces, like the Roman attack on the ship, remained maddeningly out of place.

The timber of rumble changed, degenerated into dull shouts and the faint ringing of metal on metal. These noises she knew, the dialogue of deadly struggle. She could shut her eyes and imagine sitting in a cell, listening to the games played out above. Games. What was this but one giant game fought for the pleasure of Caesar alone, with Greece’s star gladiator, the Conqueror, hanging in the balance? Her stomach churned.

It was well past dawn when she heard hoofbeats, jumped to her feet. The captain drew his sword, tentatively peeked out the tent flap. He let out a held breath, looked back at her. “It’s alright.”

Lieutenant Pelagios stepped in, grinning. "The battle is ours. The Conqueror sent me to collect her slave."

"Really? I still hear fighting."

"Mop up. You should have been there, Captain. She was amazing. I've never seen anything like it." He glanced down. "You gonna put that thing away, sir?"

Joxer looked at the sword, sheathed it. "Where is she now?"

"On the field still. You know how stubborn these Romans can be."

He nodded as he approached the gladiator, then paused, fingering the key on the cord around his neck, his brow creased in thought.

"Is there a problem, Captain?"

The expression on his face raised hairs on the back of Leopard's neck. He cleared his throat. "Not really. The Conqueror just ordered me to wait here until she returned."

"Oh. She told me there's a lot of work to be done, dealing with the prisoners and the wounded, but it was safe to bring her woman."

*Her woman?* The Leopard stepped back, suddenly on edge, shook her head ever so slightly. The captain nodded but took the key from his neck anyway, fit it into the lock.

She jerked when the arrow punched through his chestplate. He chuffed softly, just as surprised as she, an apology dawning in those soft eyes as his thick fingers fumbled with the key in the lock. Wood creaked behind him, catgut string squeaking as it rubbed against yew. She shoved him out of the way, dimly heard a shout as the arrow flew by her cheek.

Pelagios pressed the other Dragon's bow down. "He wants her alive!" He drew his sword, crossed to where the captain lay panting against the Conqueror's cot, one hand clutched around the arrow, pinched dark eyes hissing pain and betrayal. The lieutenant stepped around him, blade leveled at his exposed throat. She edged closer, trying to bring him within range for a kick before he could strike. But the blade dipped, hooked out of slack fingers the leather cord holding the key, swung around to deposit it in her hand. "If you please."

She straightened, looked him square in the eye as she let the key fall to the floor.

A cold smile. "Pick it up."

She lifted her chin, didn't move a muscle.

"He said you would be uncooperative." The lieutenant tapped a finger to his pursed lips in thought. "Perhaps I'll lop off one of your hands. That would solve our problem."

Fast as a snake he struck. She jerked her hands back against the manacles, flinched as the blade bit deep into the center pole, stopping just short of her knuckles. Pelagios grinned. "He might not like that, though. What to do?" His brow furrowed in mock concentration, his eyes sliding to her escort bleeding on the rug, flicking back to her mischievously. "He doesn't care, however, what happens to a nameless soldier."

He circled Joxer, his sword dragging lazy lines across the soldier's breastplate. Subtly the blade lingered under the captain's shoulder, across his vulnerable wrist and fingers, his inner thigh.

"Fool," the soldier wheezed, his scar drawn tight and ugly. "She knows I'm already dead."

The lieutenant squatted down, his lips next to the soldier's ear. "Oh, no, Joxer. You are many, many long minutes away from death." Gently he lay one hand over the red stained fingers at the captain's chest, his eyes never leaving the Leopard's as he snapped one.

He screamed, high and thin and breathless. She didn't move, didn't blink, wouldn't give the traitor the satisfaction. Another finger. Joxer grunted through clenched teeth, his face red with strain. Liquid heat poured through her, yearned to snap the pole in two and wrap chains around his bobbing larynx. She pushed it down, so deep she almost couldn't feel it, offered her best bored look.

Pelagios laughed, impressed. "By the gods, Joxer, she's colder than Hera's tit. Here you are, taking the pain meant for her, and she couldn't care less. That's what you get for trying to be a hero."

He snapped another finger. And another. Her escort lay gasping, cheeks lead white but for the whorish spray of bright red on his lips. The lieutenant took hold of his thumb, his expression making it clear he had all the time in the world.

She rattled the pole, drew his attention. Time was the only weapon she had, the faint chance someone would interfere. She sank down, floating to the floor so slowly her knees shook, evaluating her options. Pelagios crouched well out of her reach behind Joxer. The archer waited at the tent flap, an arrow nocked on the string but not drawn. Both had her at a disadvantage but for one fact: they needed her alive. Her eyes held the lieutenant's, boring into him with all the rage and defiance she could muster, holding his complete attention as she sat back on her heels. Her hand fished around on the carpet as long as she dared before it finally closed around the key. Deliberately she fumbled with it, slid it into the lock ever so slowly.

One moment Joxer's good hand fumbled under his thigh, the next it pinned into Pelagios' arm, his discarded dagger embedded in the traitor's forearm. In the time it took him to shout she wrenched the lock open, lunged for the archer. Torn between shooting her and obeying orders, he was still raising the bow when she tackled him. They tumbled out of the tent, the Leopard on top as they slid across rocks and roots. She rolled to her feet and ran, short legs pumping furiously between tents and trees toward sounds of fighting.

More shouts behind her, followed by the pounding of hooves closing in. She waited until the last possible moment, bolted away, forced a tent between her and a pursuer. She zigzagged between trees, juking and dodging every which way but always edging closer to the tree line, to the battle, to Xena.

A rider cut her off. Pelagios, his mouth twisted in a snarl. She hardly slowed, angled right as if to outrace him, spun left and cut behind them before his palomino could turn.

A shrill whistle pierced her awareness. Hooves crashed into her side, sent her tumbling through the air to a sickening crunch and darkness.

## 46 Bellicum

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**Signal**

“Blow it again.”

The Conqueror hardly glanced at the trumpeter between slashes and parries. The blast of the horn in her ear made her skull vibrate. She couldn’t fault the man for not giving it everything he had.

A spear arced in, hungry to bury itself deep in his chest. She batted it away with her sword, almost missed a block of her own against a zealous legionnaire. She twisted hard, avoided his thrust by hairs, spun around and hacked deep into his shoulder.

A Dragon stepped into the gap and she sucked in a deep breath, squinted into the sun cresting the eastern treeline. No movement. No noise. Nothing.

“Where are they?” Marmax’s voice boomed over the din as his stallion charged through the crowd of men.

“They’ll be here,” she growled. Her mind played out other scenarios.

“Our right column has fallen too far behind. The middle can’t hold much longer.”

She stood in the stirrups, surveyed the jagged battle line. Classic Roman strategy, to split the opposing army’s front line, then turn on the advancing wing’s exposed flank. She’d counted on it, in fact. When the enemy turned west to cut off and surround the bulge in the west, the reserve cavalry would flood out of the rising sun, cut them down from behind.

No cavalry appeared.

“We’ll have to reinforce it. Get word to your front officers to hold back before Brutus cuts our army in two. Signal again—” The words guttered out in her throat. The trumpeter lay on his back in the dust, the shaft of an arrow rising like a standard from his face. She dropped to her feet, scooped up the horn and gave it another blow. No signal answered.

It was a good plan. It would have worked.

Roman trumpets shrieked. As one the legion turned, cut a swath through the overstretched middle.

Time for a new plan.

“Dragons to me!” She swung into the saddle, spurred her mount headlong into the gap with a shrill battle cry that turned men’s faces white. Her sword danced among theirs, flitting from partner to partner, occasionally kissing their wielders and sealing it with a splash of blood. Something slashed at her leg, bit into the greave. Her swing knocked the weapon out of the soldier’s hand and a vicious kick to the chest shoved him back, taking down two more legionnaires. Her palm found the chakram and she let fly, her ears tracking the weapon’s deadly path through the enemy as her sword cleared out survivors. By the time it returned she’d opened a hole four men wide, a hole the Romans seemed reluctant to fill.

They did, of course. By then her Dragons caught up with her and the fighting began in earnest. She rushed up and down the line on horseback, cut down any man who threatened to break through the paper-thin defenses.

Shouts rose from the rear. Smoke drifted out of the trees behind them, grew thicker with each passing heartbeat. At the first glimpse of flames, the bottom dropped out of her stomach.

“The camp’s under attack!” one of her soldiers yelled. “They have us surrounded!” All around her, the courage of the men began to crumble.

She rose up in the saddle, pitched her voice over the din of battle. “Listen to me! They’ve cut off our retreat, will give no quarter. If today is your day to die, take five of the bastards to Tartarus with you!”

True or not, a grim resolve rippled through her ranks. They surged again, more determined than ever to press forward. Her attention flicked back to the burning camp. Romans were usually too smart to provoke their enemies into a fight to the death. Something was wrong, and where trouble was, at the heart of it she’d find her gladiator.

Joxer was smart. He’d get her clear of it. He’d take her to the ends of the known world to get her clear of it. So why did her stomach twist like she’d swallowed an asp?

“Cadmus!” she bellowed between slashes of her blade.



The Dragon seemed to take forever to extract himself from the fighting. “Conqueror?” he panted.

“Find out what’s happened to our camp.”

He nodded, ran toward the rear.

Time stretched. For the longest time Helios lingered over the treetops, seeming to set their branches on fire with his apparent reluctance to move. Just as suddenly it was high in the smoke-filled sky, tiny and white-hot on her arms and neck. Bodies underfoot made fighting more treacherous, turned the packed earth to mud the color of rust. Time and again reinforcements and surges pushed them back, spread the Dragons thin, threatened to burst like a boil upon the unprotected flank of her army, only to be beaten back at great cost. Each time she rose in the saddle, counted fewer and fewer of her elite guard still standing.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d fought a prolonged battle. It grew more difficult to hide her exhaustion, and her enemies took notice. With every tired swing some young soldier leapt at the chance to be the one, the man who killed the Conqueror. And each time she dredged up the strength to overcome him, and the next one, and the next...

“Conqueror!” Cadmus must have shouted half a dozen times before it penetrated the clamor. She couldn’t turn her horse, couldn’t disengage from a handful of very persistent legionnaires. “Report!” she called out over her shoulder, her chakram blocking a gladius while one booted foot shoved a soldier off her sword.

He jumped in, shield and sword covering her flank. “Camp’s been torched,” he yelled. “It’s spreading into the forest.”

“My tent?”

He shoved his opponent onto another legionnaire’s sword. “Burned to the ground. Hoofprints everywhere.”

The eastern ridgeline drew her eye, a terrible truth settling in the pit of her stomach. Unless Brutus had another cavalry unit, she’d been betrayed. Another question burned in her chest, one she didn’t know how to ask. “Captain Joxer—?”

“Dead.”

The word punched her in the gut. If Joxer was dead...half a dozen grim scenarios played through her head. She’d escaped. She’d been captured. She was—

Dead.

## 47 Dominus Proditoris

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### The Traitor's Lord

Pain and nausea pushed her to consciousness, to the bumping and straining of horseflesh under her nose. Each bone-jarring hoofbeat brought increasing awareness of lying on her stomach, of aches and pains up and down her side, her shoulder, her head. A rope bound her wrists behind her back, tight enough she could barely feel her fingers. Her eyes drifted open, squinted wrongways at blurry golden flanks, her cheek pressed upside-down against its sweaty hide.

It was her they were after, not Joxer. Who wanted her? Where were they taking her?

She forced throbbing eyes to focus on the riders following her, made out a distinctly Roman helmet.

They were taking her back to Caesar.

She arched her back hard, almost threw herself off the horse before a hand slammed her head down. Stars swam in her vision, and the vague nausea fluttering under her skin coalesced in a wave of half-digested porridge that spewed all over the hooves below. She hadn't the energy for a second try, kicked and squirmed anyway. Her captor had to wrestle to keep her draped across his lap. When the horse slid to a stop he gladly dumped her to the ground.

Hands tied, she braced for a hard landing but was unprepared for the white fire that speared through her shoulder and chest, arcing across her back and side. She lay there, unable to breathe or move, eyes squeezed shut against the shrinking world. Hands grabbed her arm, jerked her up onto watery knees, generating another white screech from her shoulder.

"You had strict orders not to hurt her."

Despite the oddly tinny sound to his voice, she knew who spoke, guessed where she was. Blinking and squinting, she peered around the Roman camp, nearly deserted but for Brutus and his personal guard.

"She tried to escape. At least she's intact." Pelagios pressed a palm against the blood-soaked bandage at his elbow.

Brutus tilted her chin up to look at him, turned her face aside to frown at her head. Her skin itched where gore caked on the side of her face, temple pulsing with each wild beat of her heart. His gaze raked over Pelagios. "Be glad you're still useful to Rome. Bring her."

The grip on her arms tightened and she followed, stiff against the jostling that sent mind-numbing flares through her arm. She spared it a glance, couldn't see any obvious wound. Broken? The thought sent a cold shudder through her. Between this and her other arrow-shot shoulder, she'd be hard pressed to put up a fight.

The distant sounds of shouts and horns and fighting filtered through the trees. So she was still near the battle. At least she wasn't on the road to Rome.

He led the way to a tent. His tent. Though larger than she remembered, it still lacked frivolous furnishings or decoration. Brutus never cared for the ostentatious. "Wait outside," he ordered Pelagios and his men.

"She'll run the moment you take your eyes off her," the lieutenant warned.

Brutus leveled his gaze, waiting patiently. After a few moments, the Dragon scowled and ducked back through the flap. He approached her, stopped when their eyes met. "Are you okay?"

Broken, bloodied, and chained, she ignored the question. She'd spent many months in this tent, took in the familiar cot, trunk, and desk. Scrolls and maps covered it, unreadable from where she stood.

He shifted, moved into her line of sight. "Did she hurt you?"

Angry eyes cut his way. He asked now, after all these years, if her owner hurt her? Somehow he could always turn a blind eye when her wounds came from Caesar.

Perhaps he could read her thoughts. Or perhaps even his stunted conscience couldn't miss the hypocrisy. He turned away, a hand idly brushing a scroll on his desk. "Familiar, isn't it? A strange woman standing chained in my tent, bleeding on my favorite Egyptian rug, accused of being a spy for the Conqueror. As I recall, I was at a loss for what to do with that woman, too."

She chafed at his conversational tone, found herself glad for the rope around her wrists. It made her think twice about flying at him in a rage.

"Some spy, that woman. Even half-dead, she talked endlessly about honor and dignity and mercy and loyalty and truth. She spoke of them so highly, I found myself convinced to spare her life." Finally he looked her in the eye. "You're not much like that woman, are you? All hard and closed and hollow, brittle as shell. Looks like Caesar won. If he couldn't have your light, no one could."

She swallowed hard, stung. She'd survived Caesar's soulless existence for so long, was there anything left of her?

He took a step closer, genuine concern in his eyes. "I believe that woman is in there somewhere. She captured my heart once. Broke it, too. But I'd rather have her back than this animal you've become. Just say something, Gabrielle. Talk to me."

*Broke your heart?* Words pressed against the back of her teeth, hot and sour. She bit her tongue and looked away, too tempted to trust herself.

His eyes raked her throat, the fine gold collar. “They say you talk to her.” He said it quietly, coolly. “What I can’t understand is why. Four years of silence, and you end it for that sick murderous whore.”

Chained or not she flung herself at him in a fury, her half-healed shoulder ramming into his breastplate, knocking them both off balance. He threw her back against the table, scattering quills and scrolls and parchment across the floor. She gritted her teeth, rigid with pain.

“So there’s truth in the captain’s reports,” Brutus breathed, staring as if laying eyes on Medusa herself. “You have feelings for her.”

She stared at him, caught off balance.

“I wouldn’t have believed it. The untamable Leopard of Rome servicing the Conqueror’s every whim like some cheap harlot. Why else would you defend her now but for love?”

Stirred to the edge of fury, she caught herself, suddenly wary. This was not the straightforward man she remembered. He sounded like Caesar, his words sending her lurching from rage to despair to fear to resentment until she was too wound up to think straight. She shook her head, struggled to bring her emotions under control.

“She’s out there, you know. Fighting. Losing. Dying, thanks to Pelagios. Her surprise attack from the east? I sent him after you instead, allowing us to cut through her center without reprisal. Her reserve army in the forest? Revealed by Pelagios as a ruse of empty campfires, leaving me to commit my full force to destroying her. The amazing ‘Warrior Princess’ you used to speak so highly of in your tales becomes rather ordinary without the element of surprise.”

Her mind reeled, her attention drawn toward the tent flap, toward the clash of metal on metal and the blare of trumpets in the valley below. Somewhere in that mass of soldiers Xena fought. Did she know she was betrayed? Did she see the trap laid for her? Was she even alive?

“She’s lost, Gabrielle. The war is lost. Cleopatra’s so-called aid was just a feint. That “retreating” legion landed in Corinth; it surrendered days ago. The Conqueror’s southern army is besieged between Egypt’s army and her fleet. Without reinforcements and supplies, her eastern army will be destroyed by the Persians in a matter of weeks, even days. This battle we’re fighting here today is a formality, Gabrielle, nothing more. Only two questions remain; what will become of you, and what will become of her. You can save her. Convince her to surrender and end this battle and I will spare her life. The price of your silence is her death, and the deaths of her men.”

His hand tenderly brushed her elbow. She jerked away from it, burned. He could be lying, a trick to get her to talk, reveal something about her owner. But if everything he said was true... She forced words out carefully. “You only spare her so Caesar can kill her himself.”

He blinked, surprised at her words, contained his smile. “True. She’s dead, one way or another. But you can still save hundreds, even thousands of lives today. That brave woman I met all those years ago knows it’s the right thing to do.”

She closed her eyes, couldn’t block out the distant sounds of battle, of death. Thousands of lives weighed against the Conqueror’s. Finally they opened again, flat and dead.

“Help me.”

His brow furrowed. “Help you?”

“My shoulder,” she murmured, twisting in her binds, wincing.

She couldn’t summon the will to look up from the floor. After a few moments of sawing with his dagger, the rope gave way and she gingerly rubbed some feeling back into her hands, felt out the shoulder for damage. The whole area was tender to the touch, misshapen and discolored, but not obviously broken. With some trepidation she tried to move it, hissed. Dislocated then, far worse than the match with the lion.

“Pelagios!”

The lieutenant ducked his head into the tent, his sword half-drawn. His eyes narrowed at the sight of the unrestrained Leopard.

“Bring the healer,” barked Brutus.

“Sir? I don’t think that’s—”

“Do it!” he bellowed, his voice cracking with the force of it.

The Dragon stared at him as if he were mad. Brutus’s gaze never wavered. With a sharp exhale the traitor left the tent.

They stood apart awkwardly, the one massaging her shoulder while the other opened and closed his mouth, suddenly unsure what to say.

She preempted him. “Your spy Bellerophon is dead.”

Brutus chuckled. “Bellerophon, a spy? Hardly. That fanatic would never betray the Conqueror. Besides, he’s too wrapped up in his own war against the Amazons to see the bigger picture.”

She shook her head. “But you’ve been getting reports from the captain—” Her eyes widened with understanding. “Marcus.”

“A sensible man.”

What blood was left in her cheeks drained completely. “He was the soldier on the ship, the one giving orders to the assassin.”

“Unfortunately, she arrested the intended assassin and his second failed to kill her. Imagine how different today would be if they’d succeeded.”

The nausea returned full force, bent her over just trying to hold it down. He took her arm, steadied her. “It’s alright, Gabrielle. When we get back to Rome, you’ll belong to me, not Caesar. You’ll never have to serve him, or the Conqueror, again.”

She stared at him, barely comprehended his meaning. Abruptly she grabbed the back of his head, slammed his face into her knee. He staggered, hands cupping his nose in shock. “I don’t belong to anyone,” she growled, “and I’ll never go back to Rome.” An elbow to the temple dropped him to the carpet.

Her heart pounded. Reflexively she snatched the gladius from his scabbard, backed away. *What now? Not much time—* She lifted the blade to plunge it into his unprotected neck, hesitated. The sword wavered, lowered altogether. She couldn’t. Not like this.

She crouched over him, tied his wrists with the remains of the rope. Her injured shoulder hardly cooperated, her left hand tingling, slowing her down when she needed speed most. Hiding him was out of the question. Tucking her arm against her bruised side, she hurried to the back of the tent and peeked under the edge. Fortune granted her some scrub as cover, and with a silent prayer to Hermes, she wriggled under the canvas.

## 48 Ultimum Bellum Victricus

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### The Conqueror’s Last Stand

Her mount squealed and pitched, a pair of spears bristling from his chest. She tumbled from the saddle, scrambled to her feet swinging. One legionnaire fell instantly. Three more took his place, surging through a break in the line, their shields a wall bristling with gladii like porcupine needles.

A kick to the middle shield knocked the soldier off balance. That was all the room she needed to deflect his companion’s predictable thrust low and spin, her boot hooking across his helmet. The chakram bashed the third attack aside, her blade biting flesh in its wake. They danced that way for hours, the queen of death and an endless sea of suitors, none of them proving worthy of her grace, her brilliance. Yet.

If any of her Dragons remained, she’d lost track of them in the chaos. Cadmus had fallen long ago, spitting curses at the Romans pinning him to the ground with their spears. She didn’t even try to avenge his death, and for that she asked his forgiveness.

She kept moving. Running, if she were truthful with herself, but moving, never letting them comfortably surround her, always breaking out of the circle and forcing them to keep up. She couldn't feel her arms anymore, couldn't feel much of anything but exhaustion in her bones, the burn of smoke and dry air in her lungs. She'd find some of her soldiers, take a stand against her pursuers, killing and wounding as many as she could before the last Greek soldier fell and she'd be on the run again.

Her defensive lines were in tatters. Already some of her men had thrown down their weapons, preferring the conflagration of the forest to the surging tide of legionnaires. No drummers, no trumpeters remained to signal retreat, and there was nowhere to go if they did. A thought flitted across her mind—*I will die here*—but her body objected, fought harder than ever, kept moving.

Another attempt to surround her. She launched the chakram, sent it ricocheting off one shiny brass helmet after another, her sword cutting deadly beauty in its wake. She spit out a laugh, high and wicked, from some black part of her soul that rejoiced in destruction, even her own. *Not long now*, it whispered. *You're almost free of it. The plotting, the betrayals, the pain...*

No more running.

She turned on them, limbs and thoughts just a bit lighter with anticipation. "Come on, you sons of dogs!" She flashed a bone-white grin, lay into them with unspeakable joy. The vicious assault drove them back, her nicked blade and shining circlet of Hephaestan steel carving up anyone too slow to get away. She would single-handedly take down every last one of them.

She hardly felt the slice across her shoulder blade, threw a kick into the soldier's throat that lifted him off the ground. A spear jabbed at her side. One leg slammed the tip into the ground, severed the hand that held it. A hard twist couldn't quite avoid the thrust at her gut, but the slice across leathers and skin seemed small payment for the pleasure of threading her sword through the wielder's windpipe.

Thick steel pierced her thigh. A sharp jab with her pommel broke the wrist wielding the gladius and she stumbled back, kept her footing even with the weapon imbedded in her leg. Before they could surge forward her weapons snapped up, one mad look promising death to the first comer. Slowly they encircled her, hard hungry eyes searching for the right moment for to swarm her.

A quiet hum caught her ear, the beating wings of a charm of hummingbirds thronging out of the forest. Not wings. Fletching. She grabbed a Roman shield, hunkered down beneath it before the first Roman cocked his head.

Arrows fell like hailstones from the sky, pounding her wooden shield, drawing screams from those too slow to raise theirs. Brutus was either cold-hearted or desperate if he was willing to fire on his own men to kill her.

When the thumping stopped she peeked out, ducked back again as another flight peppered the battlefield. She gritted her teeth, flinched as a direct hit pierced the shield, the arrowhead clipping her cheek.

An arrowhead made of stone. From the trees rose a trilling cry like scores of angry birds. She scrambled to her feet, attacking soldiers suddenly half their number. Distracted by the Amazon war cries and the death still showering down from above, they made easy targets. She limped through them, unmindful of the arrows falling around her, hardly aware of her own lethal strikes. One shieldless Roman blocked her swing and she lashed at him, her chakram barely missing the shaped breastplate under the red cloak. A solid kick to her midsection drove her back. The wounded leg gave out, dropped her on her ass. She raised her chakram to let fly—

“Xena, it’s me!” Under the Roman brass helmet pale green eyes flashed. The gladiator lunged past her, deflected another blade, spun around and elbowed the attacking soldier in the back of his head.

Gabrielle was alive. Relief flooded through her, made her ridiculously light-headed. The Leopard lay into the soldiers, her gladius cutting them down with speed and brutality the Conqueror had never seen from her before. Two were mortally wounded before they realized she wasn’t one of them. Three more put up a better fight, even managed to lay open her bicep, but she moved like water rushing around so many stones, impossible to contain. One by one they fell, life’s blood pouring over thirsty earth, the last spraying scarlet across his comrade’s corpses as she yanked the sword from his neck. She whirled, searching for the next target, a murderous fire in those eyes the Conqueror had never seen before.

The moment she lay eyes on the Xena it softened. In a heartbeat the Leopard was by her side. “You’ve been betrayed. Marcus—” She faltered at the sight of the ivory hilt sticking out of her leg. Hesitant fingers hovering over the impaled leg, uncertain what to do.

Xena waved her off. “You’re hurt, too.” She gestured at the arm cradled against her ribs, the blood crusted on her face under the helmet. The Leopard ignored her, tore a strip of linen from a fallen soldier’s tunic and pressed it against her midsection. The Conqueror shook her head. “Leave it. Get out of here before you wind up dead.”

Quietly, “You don’t give me orders, Conqueror. Not today.”

She glanced down, seeing for the first time blood coursing from the wound in her side. “Gabrielle, stop. I’m not going anywhere, and I’m willing to bet those Amazons aren’t here as friends. Go now, before they kill you too.”

“No.”

She meant to argue. This was one clash of wills she refused to lose. “Gabrielle—”

Pounding hooves were her only warning. The rider came out of nowhere, sword swinging. She had only a moment to heave the gladiator clear; the arcing blade caught her arm instead, sent



the chakram sailing. She gasped and clutched it to her, eyes squeezed shut, afraid to open them for fear of holding a stump.

Metal rang against metal overhead. Reluctantly she opened her eyes, found the Leopard clashing with Pelagios, his distinctive palomino stomping the ground perilously close to her head. She rolled clear, crawled on elbows and knees from danger.

She crawled a long way before bumping into a fallen shield, curling up beneath it. Only then did she summon the courage to look down. A gash lay her forearm open to the bone, but it was still attached. She let out a held breath, tentatively tried to make a fist.

Nothing.

Dead or not, the Conqueror, Destroyer of Nations, was no more.

## 49 Fuga

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### Flight

The Leopard ducked and leapt, evading the attacks of both horse and rider without letting them near the wounded Conqueror. He wheeled the palomino and whistled, but she jumped back, avoided getting kicked a second time by mere inches.

A jab of his spurs sent the horse charging at her, white-eyed and screeching. Her legs coiled to jump out of the way, hesitated. Xena would be trampled. Desperately she lunged forward, toward flashing hooves and gnashing teeth. A fist found the mount's sensitive nose as they collided shoulder to shoulder, she and the horse, the force of it hurling her to the ground. Red and white coursed from her shoulder and ribs, stained her vision. She coughed in the dust and rolled, clambered to her feet. By some impossibility, she found the Conqueror no worse for wear, crawling by inches away from the squealing dancing mount. The Fates had been generous in sparing her, granted the kind of fortune they never granted twice. That horse had to die.

She switched the gladius to her useless left and picked up a bent spear, charged the pair as they spun to reset. The tip scored a direct hit but the crooked tip glanced off the horse's shoulder, opened a red gash as long as her sword across tawny ribs. Again that enraged peal. The animal twisted and reared, hooves knocking her back even as its rider lost his seat.

She tried to roll to one side, sagged back, her arm cradling under her breast where the horse's hoof struck. Breathing came hard, like spears between ribs. Her good arm fumbled blindly across the rocky ground, searching for gladius or spear, finding neither.

A boot pinned her hand against the rocks. She swallowed the cry of pain, forced herself to focus on Pelagios' triumphant face.

“Not so tough now, are you, bitch?” A twist of his heel ground her palm into the rocks. It took every ounce of will not to scream. “No, I didn’t think so. You’re just a little girl without her little swords.” He flashed white teeth at her, knelt straddling her, the weight on her ribs enough to send her vision spiraling to a pinprick in the empty sky. Dreamily he drew his dagger, placed its tip at the hollow of her throat. She gulped for air, desperate to stay conscious.

“Any last words, silent one?”

She nodded, took every moment she dared to catch her breath. “Tell Joxer I’m sorry.”

He laughed. “Joxer’s dead, little girl.”

She nodded. “So are you.”

She smashed the rock under her raw bleeding hand into his temple. He reeled, grabbed his head. She swung again, hit him square in the bleeding bandages at his elbow. He pitched off her, bellowing like a bull and clutching at the wound. In a heartbeat she latched her thighs around his neck, locked her ankles, and squeezed. He thrashed, fingernails tearing her skin, the dagger carving wildly into one bare leg. The rock crashed into his skull, split it open. With a growl she bashed it again, kept bashing until she hadn’t the strength to lift her arm anymore.

When she finally kicked free, the mess between her legs barely resembled a man’s head. She lay there panting, the world coming back to her in pieces. The reluctant separation of bloody fingers glued to stone. The ache in her chest and shoulder and leg that became one unified throb. The clash and roar of battle, near but not immediate. The cries of Amazons on the war path.

Those cries forced her to her feet. Immediately a stream of dark red oozed from deep lines in her punctured thigh, sent her stumbling to her knees. The hem of a dead soldier’s tunic became a bandage over the freely-flowing wound, another tied even more tightly over that. When she pressed up again, the leg wobbled but held. Her bad arm shored up hurt ribs as she looked around. Brutus’ gladius lay near; she scooped it up in her scraped palm as she limped by. She had to get her bearings, get back to Xena.

The palomino stood nearby, waiting for its fallen rider, glaring at her. The golden hide twitched where dark blood caked in its fur, but there wasn’t another man or creature within bowshot still standing. She set her jaw, made her way over to it grudgingly.

A toss of its head jerked the reins out of reach, but she lunged a second time and snatched them up before it could run. The ornery animal fought for more than a minute before her patience finally snapped. “Alright! I get it,” she growled. “You hate me, and I don’t like you either. But right now she needs you, and I’ll do anything it takes to get her out of here alive. You understand? Anything.” The conviction of the last word surprised her. If ever there was a time to run, it was now. The Conqueror lay wounded somewhere amongst the fallen, hunted by the Amazons she’d nearly exterminated. Free of manacles, watchful eyes, and palace walls, of every vestige of her enslavement but the gold collar hidden under her cloak, nothing stood between the Leopard and freedom but dread. Of the unknown. Of waking up tomorrow a hunted woman,

runaway slave, enemy of the Amazons, traitor to Rome. Finding herself with nowhere to go, wounded, hungry, and alone. Tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that...

A shake of the sword in the beast's face earned a whinny of protest, but she tugged on the reins and it followed without a fight.

Together they wended through bodies and debris, much of it painted with blood, sprinkled generously with dust and ash. They didn't wander far; long black hair under a red shield caught her eye. She threw it off, rolled the limp Conqueror onto her back. Blood stained the bronze breastplate, soaked the leathers beneath. Suddenly strengthless, the gladiator sank down in the dark muck beside her. She reached out uncertainly, brushed the muddy strands of hair from the Conqueror's slack alabaster face.

"Can't feel my fingers," came a mumble from grey lips.

She gasped with relief. "Xena! We've got to get out of here." One arm hooked under the Conqueror's shoulder, helped her sit up.

"Stop." Flat eyes stared at her. "Don't waste your energy, Gabrielle. I can't walk. I'll only slow you down. Go."

"We're not walking. Can you stand?"

The Conqueror took stock of her legs, nodded. Even with the warlord's help, it took a good deal of strength and not a little pain to haul her to her feet, a great deal more to hoist her into the saddle. An errant bump of the sword in the Conqueror's leg doubled her over the saddle horn with a sickly moan. The Leopard handed her the reins and the weapons, shoved a Roman helmet over Xena's glossy black mane before dragging herself up awkwardly behind her. She made the mistake of glancing down, teetered in the saddle before her arms latched on to the thin waist in front of her. Drawing the stolen red cloak around them both, she collected the reins and, with a prayer to Hermes, dug her heels in the horse's sides.

The beast lurched into motion, almost throwing them both from the saddle. Only the Conqueror's white-knuckled grip on the saddle horn kept them both on its back. They careened through the battlefield, the horse fighting her inexperienced grip on the reins, choosing its own breakneck path through the carnage. It was all she could do to hold on to Xena and stay on the horse's rump; commanding the mad animal was beyond rational thought.

The Conqueror took the reins in her good fist. Within moments they slowed, the motion becoming less erratic, more of a controlled flight toward the nearest treeline and escape, but the slave didn't feel her heart rate slow until they plunged into the shadows of the forest.

Creamy smoke blew thick through the trees, stinging her eyes and throat. The horse tossed its head, whinnied nervously at the strange orange shafts of light piercing the canopy. In the breeze they danced, godlike columns of flame scouring the forest floor. The strange beauty of it made her shiver.

Out of that shimmering curtain of light stepped a giant bird, feathers flared around flat eyes. A woman's body followed, hard muscle clearly visible beneath scant doe-skin. Her heart stopped. Terreis.

Reason kicked in. Scar-free, she was just an Amazon; three of her sisters stepped out of the shadows, arrows already nocked, strings drawn tight to their cheeks.

The palomino spooked, danced sideways. The slave certainly had no control over the animal, and her owner lay heavily on the saddle horn, unconscious or close to it. She could do nothing but look defeated and non-threatening, hide under the red cloak and brass helmet and caked dirt and blood, and pray.

The leader raised her hand, signaling for them to hold. She stepped a little closer, looked them over, then raised her mask.

Ephiny. The Leopard almost sagged with relief at the sight of a familiar face, but that flush of joy died quickly. This was not the healer's apprentice. This was not the woman she shared an uneasy truce with those last few days in the Conqueror's chamber. This was the Amazon regent, bound by duty to tribe and queen, and clearly the queen had no intention of honoring a treaty with Greece. By the look in her eye, she wasn't fooled by their stolen Roman garb.

Inconspicuously the Leopard reached a hand under the form slumped over the saddle horn, wrapped fingers around the hilt of a sword, prepared for an extremely short fight. With a single word or signal from Ephiny, her sisters would fill them both with arrows.

They stared at each other, the Regent looking over her wounds, sizing up the lump pitched over the saddle horn in front of her. "Just Romans," she called back to her warriors. "Run, swine. You get a head start while we kill the Conqueror."

Ephiny's words sent a shiver down her spine. She didn't have to feign the nervous grateful nod as she gently nudged the horse to pick up the pace, glanced back over her shoulder.

Mask up, Ephiny watched her go. Those hard eyes promised a head start, nothing more. If she didn't change her mind before they left her sight. The gladiator kept her eyes forward, her ears straining for the sound of gut-string bending wood, her back prickling where imagined arrows would find their marks.

When she allowed herself to glance back again, the ghost-birds were gone.

## **50 Atrum Angustum Callis**

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She flew through the shadows, dimly aware of branches tearing at her skin, horseflesh straining between her thighs, ice worming into her bones. She waited for it to claim her.

It took its damned time.

Bitterness welled up in the back of her throat that this, some mad rush through thick forest and overgrown deer trails, would be the last ride of the once-feared Conqueror. She wished for something more fearsome, some amazing feat that men would tell tales of to their children's children. But the men who witnessed her last great battle were likely dead, and here she was bleeding out on the back of a stolen horse, fleeing her best chance for immortal glory. Then again, at least her body wouldn't be hacked to pieces as trophies for Roman and Amazon display.

She wished she were cleverer with words, could come up with some epitaph sufficiently witty or wise or ferocious to befit the legacy of the Conqueror. But her mind remained maddeningly blank, distracted by the saddle horn digging into her breastbone, the gladius twisting in her thigh, the hand dangling limply down the horse's side. It irked her to no end that the only pithy comment rattling through her head was, "Here lies Xena, another one of Caesar's conquered."

The light dimmed, faded to shades of grey and darker grey, but it seemed take forever. Cold burned her hands and face. And when would she stop feeling the pain of her wounds? Hanging on a cross, one learned a thing or two about death. As deaths went, this one had to be one of the more uncomfortable and tedious ways to go.

A nasty thought took root, one that ruined her morbid musings. What if she actually lived?

"Stop," she murmured past thick lips. Hooves trampled over the word, stamped it into the hard packed dirt of the path they raced along. "Stop," she said again, more forcefully this time, pushing herself upright in the saddle. Instantly the shadowy sky spun overhead, although she couldn't be sure if it was her own lightheadedness or the spooking of the horse beneath her.

"What's wrong?" came the groggy voice behind her.

"Lemme off."

"We have to keep going. The Amazons—"

"Off!" She slid out of the saddle, forced the slave to haul back on the reins to keep her from hitting the ground full speed. Her boot caught on the dismount, jarring her leg and nearly sending her over backwards but for the gladiator's strong grip yanking her around, half-knocking the wind out of her as she sat down hard. She bit down on a few choice words for the slave, bent her will to overcoming the throbbing in her leg.

Several long moments of colorful swearing later, the gladiator knelt beside her. "Of all the places to take a break!" But she removed the red cloak from her own shoulders, wrapped it around the warlord. It was warm, almost as warm as the body at her back had been.

“Where are we?”

The Leopard shook her head, winced as she bent closer to examine the embedded sword. “Not sure. On the side of a mountain, somewhere east.”

She moved away and a bitter gust blasted through the gap in the cloak. Xena shuddered and looked around, noticed for the first time the steep treeless slope the goat path traversed. Clouds hung low, muting the failing light. “I smell snow.”

The slave returned to her side, offered her the last of a mostly empty water skin, but the warlord shook her head. “I couldn’t find cloth for bandages. We have to keep moving. Come on.”

“No.”

The tone in her voice drew the Leopard up short. “Xena, the Amazons can’t be far behind. We don’t have time to rest—”

“I mean no, I’m not coming with you.”

“Yes, you are. I already told you—”

“And I already told you. I’m not gonna make it. That horse can’t outrun the Amazons with both of us on it—”

“Then I’ll walk.”

“Not on that leg.” She eyed the soaked rag tied around it doubtfully.

“It’s just stiff, that’s all. Let’s go.”

She reached again, but the warlord shoved her away impatiently. “Why are you so determined to help me?”

“Why are you so determined to die?” the slave snapped back.

“I told you. I can’t feel my fingers. Can’t move them, can’t hold a sword—”

“So that’s it? Take your sword away and you’re finished? You are not some common thug—”

“Stop.”

“—who’s only skill is breaking heads! You’re the Conqueror, Greece’s last hope to stay free of Rome—”

“Enough.”

“—and if you don’t stop him, I don’t know who else can!”

“I said enough!” Her head split with the force of the shout, left her teetering on the edge of retching. “The Conqueror is gone. Her power always stemmed from the sword. Without a sword, I wouldn’t be able to keep my allies at bay, much less my enemies.”

“You just need time to heal. Then you can raise another army—”

“You can’t heal this!” She shook her useless hand in the slave’s face, then sighed, spent. “And I don’t want another army. I’m done. Almost twenty years leading one army after another, and what has it gotten me? A citizenry that despises me, a military that betrays me, a stomach that rebels against me, and a slave who doesn’t do anything I tell her.”

The Leopard rocked back on her heels, eyeing the Conqueror, her jaw set. “You finished? If you want to leave your hard-won lands to lesser men, be my guest. But don’t tell me Xena, the great Warrior Princess, is ready to let herself freeze to death on this mountain because she can’t hold a sword.”

Yet again, the slave’s arguments stirred in her the urge to scream or strangle her. “You have a better plan?”

A firm nod. “First we get you back on that horse. Then we ride east to Mount Nestos, find your healer friend—”

“He’s not my friend. I cost him someone he loved. Two someones, if Niklos is dead. He won’t help us.”

“You saved his son’s life, remember? I’m sure he can be convinced to help us.” Her eyes promised terrible things if he didn’t. “He can fix your arm. Then we’ll go north, east, south, wherever you want to, leave Greece and Caesar behind, go to lands where they’ve never heard of the Conqueror.”

Xena watched her, dubious. The Leopard waited, eyes dark in the cloudy twilight, lips trembling with cold.

She shook her head. “That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard. Do you realize how many things could go wrong with that plan? We could both freeze to death before morning.” But a smirk twitched at the corners of her lips, and she accepted Gabrielle’s arm pulling her to her feet.

She watched the gladiator fumble with the reins one-handed, frowned. “Your arm, is it broken?”

The gladiator tried to move it without success, winced. “Dislocated, I think.”

“C’mere.” She felt out the damage. “Pretty bad. What in Tartarus happened to it?”

“This horse. And a tree, I think. My ribs hurt like Tartarus.”

She arched an eyebrow, took the wrist in a firm grip. Grimly the gladiator clung the saddle, grunted as she levered the elbow up and wrenched the shoulder back into socket. For a moment she stood back in that practice yard, doing the same to the silent leopard woman, whetting her appetite with a challenge to be conquered. The memory roused a smile. “Better?”

A few shades paler than she already was, Gabrielle tested it gingerly, nodded. “Thank you. Again.” She clambered into the saddle, helped the warlord up behind her. Getting back into the saddle was ten times harder than she remembered it. She adjusted herself on the palomino’s rump, wrapped cloak and arms around the smaller woman.

Head on the Leopard’s shoulder, she murmured into the wind, “Do you realize you’re the most expensive slave I’ve ever owned? You cost me a king’s ransom in dinars, a servant boy, a prisoner, a healer’s apprentice, two captains, three armies, a palace, my lands, my subjects, my title, and my livelihood.”

The slave glanced over her shoulder uneasily. “Wish you’d never lain eyes on me?”

Without hesitation, Xena shook her head. “No. You’re worth every dinar.” Awkward as the admission sounded, it felt...good. She hadn’t done many things right in her life, but rescuing one half-broken slave from Rome—and allowing herself to be rescued in return—was one of the few choices she didn’t regret. She did, however, wrestle with a vague sense of being adrift. Without the Conqueror to drive her, without the intention of defeating Rome and taking over the known world, without even her sword to rely upon...for the first time since she was a girl, she didn’t know what her future held. Anxiety stirred in her gut, and a tingle of excitement. She shivered.

“Are you alright?” The Leopard was still looking at her.

She nodded slowly. “Just remembering a feeling I used to get long ago.”

Her slave’s brow furrowed. “Is that a good thing?”

She thought about it, smiled slowly. “I’m freezing, Gabrielle. Take me somewhere warm.”

Her arms tightened around the gladiator as she nudged the horse up the dark narrow path.

FIN

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