

**A SWORD OF WRATH, BOOK I:
BLOOD AND DUST**

Copyright © K. E. MacLeod 2014

First edition published by K. E. MacLeod, and distributed in the UK and Worldwide 2014.

The right of K. E. MacLeod to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher/author. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, institutions and organisations mentioned in this novel are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously without any intent to describe actual conduct.

Chapter One

Like most heroes of old, she was born in secret...

The old woman studied the young soldier standing beside her, his eyes wide with horror at the event unfolding before them in the tiny isolated cottage. "You've seen a lot of death, hmm?" she asked. "Just not very much life." The old woman, known only as 'Agatha' to the few who were acquainted with her, spoke to the soldier, Kaeso, in a broken patois. He suspected, correctly, that she was not used to using the native Romulus dialect, which was common throughout the northern part of the kingdom.

"No, I-I," he stuttered, searching for an excuse to better explain his nervousness, but not finding one, simply answered instead, "I haven't."

Agatha continued her work beside him. She had hair like gray straw stuffed beneath a plain piece of material tied around her head. Her body was short and stout and upon it she wore the traditional dress of her people, called a *chiton*. Over it she had placed an apron in the futile hope that she would stay clean as she assisted the heavily pregnant woman silently writhing on the table before them.

The young woman, which the soldier knew as Lady Catherine of Tyre, daughter of Lord Heron of Tyre, member of the Emperor's Court, had fled the kingdom of Lycania hastily and was still dressed in the pink silk *stola*, which betrayed her courtly status.

"Why doesn't she scream, moan, *something*?" he asked, greatly disturbed by the woman's silence.

"Because," the portly woman answered proudly, "the women of my people do not cry out in childbirth." She took another blood-soaked linen away from beneath the Lady Catherine and replaced it quickly with a fresh one.

The young soldier's stomach lurched with her action. He had never seen so much blood coming from one person, not even on the battlefield. In fact, none of his lifetime of training could have ever prepared him for any of the events that had transpired in the last twenty-four hours: not for the Emperor demanding that he find the Lady Catherine and mete out her death sentence, nor for the fruitless search that brought him into the kingdom's furthest reaches or for discovering a cottage, rotting away in the woods where he came to rest - only to find the old witch woman tending to the Lady Catherine herself in the midst of giving birth.

The woman before him continued to struggle in quiet agony, her eyes closed to the world around her. Inside, her body was stretching, tearing as the bones of her pelvis came

apart to allow the passage of a baby through her womb into its new world. She grasped the edges of the wooden table as each new wave of a contraction flowed through her - though, in truth, they had long ceased being waves and had, instead, coalesced into one great, unbearable pain. She had never known such distress and was completely unaware of her surroundings or that the sun had set and the night birds had begun their songs.

The soldier looked down and, feeling powerless to do much else, grasped her hand. Agatha, meanwhile, had continued to replace the bloody rags but her eye caught the simple, gentle gesture and she smiled sadly to herself.

"So," she said as she worked, "which do you prefer? Life or death?"

"W-what?" The soldier pulled his gaze away from the Lady Catherine and settled it on the old woman.

"Death or life? Which is easier to watch?"

"I don't know," his eyes rested again on Lady Catherine. He spoke slowly, images of past battles flowing through his mind. "I've seen combat many times. I've seen my friends killed in the most brutal of ways. I have even helped to take the leg off of one of my fellow soldiers because it was infected from a stab wound but... this?"

She smirked, "Did your friend cry out when they removed his leg?"

With his free hand he smoothed Lady Catherine's hair away from her forehead; it was cold and clammy. His eyebrows knit together, "Yes, and even more afterwards."

"I think if you men understood what it meant to bring life into this world, you would not be so quick to end it."

He nodded slowly, "I fear you may be right about that."

Agatha turned her attention back to Lady Catherine. She walked around the table and pressed her palms against the sides and then the top of the woman's belly. Her expression grew grave as she pressed against them again, verifying her suspected fear. Reluctantly, she wiped her hands on her apron as she spoke, "Catherine? Your baby isn't gonna make it like this."

For the first time since the soldier had arrived, Lady Catherine opened her eyes. They were gray, he noted, and despite the redness that ringed around them, beautiful.

"Wha... what... does that mean?" she asked, breathlessly.

"She's going die if we don't do something."

"Then do something... *woman!*"

Agatha shook her head, "I only know of one thing to do in this situation and I only seen it done one time before but," her eyes flicked to the soldier's then back to Catherine's, "you won't survive."

Catherine's neck was barely able to support her head and it soon began to waver from the strain as she tried to keep it aloft while she spoke, "Then take my life... *and save my child's!*" She attempted to reach out to Agatha with her free hand, catching only the edge of the cloth of the old woman's dress and pulling her in, "Tell her... she was loved... by *both* of her parents. She was conceived in love and will....*ahhhh*," she convulsed in pain, pausing a brief moment and then continuing on with her words, "she will cast a light upon the darkness of this world!" She released Agatha's dress and fell back against the table, her eyes closing again.

Agatha turned away from the Lady, shaking her head as she did. *Mothers*, she thought, *they always think their babies are some kind of special but all babies are the same. They cry, they stink, they eat, then they grow up.*

And she had seen her fair share grow up in her many years of living, watching as some rose up to be tyrants, others saviors but most, she believed, became nothings. Their names weren't recorded in history books and only those closest to them mourned them when they were gone.

This baby, Agatha thought, would be no different - except that her life would be harder than most. But, she resigned herself, half of the baby's blood was from her own people and because of that, she would see to it that the child survived. She wiped her hands again on her increasingly stained apron and turned to the soldier, "I need your dagger."

His hand unconsciously went to his waistband where the *pugio* resided, "My what?"

"You heard me," she indicated his hand, "your dagger. Hand it over."

He cautiously took it from the sheath that was hooked to his waist by four large rings, and held it out to her, "What're you going to do with it?"

Agatha took it, "I'm going to finish what you came here to do." She leaned into the Lady, "Now, Catherine, I don't have any magicks or potions to ease the pain of what I'm about to do. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"You may cry out during this, for I believe even the gods will forgive you." Agatha positioned herself at the end of the table, between Catherine's bent legs. She glanced over to the soldier, "Give her the sheath to bite down on."

His heart raced and he could feel the sweat against his forehead as it began to form. He did as the old woman said and unhooked the wooden and leather sheath from his waistband. He then slid it between Catherine's teeth and as she stared up at him in fear, she could taste the metal of the iron plate that graced the sheath's front as it touched her tongue.

He looked upon the young woman and felt a million different sensations flow into him. Only a few hours before he had known her as a criminal whose life he was charged with ending. But, she wasn't a nameless soldier on a battlefield somewhere defying the Empire; she was a young woman who had fallen in love with the wrong person and now she lay in the midst of something that he would not have likely survived himself. This time, when he looked upon her face, he only felt awe at her strength.

Agatha, meanwhile, held the dagger flat against her forehead as she whispered a prayer to the gods. She then took it and, without further ceremony, sliced deep into the flesh of Lady Catherine's lower abdomen. As she did so, Catherine sat up from the table, crying out loudly. She grasped the soldier's hand, her eyes large and wild as they stared up into the rafters of the cottage. Her cries then became wails as Agatha continued to cut into her womb.

"I see the baby! I see her!" The old woman shouted excitedly, forgetting herself for a moment.

The soldier swallowed, "Is it...?" He wanted to say "alive" but he couldn't finish the sentence. He looked at the Lady, she was only whimpering now, her face as white as the sands of the Unclaimed Desert.

Agatha tossed the dagger to the ground, its metal striking the dirt floor with a dull *thump*. She reached into the flesh that she had just cut open and pulled with all her might.

With each rough tug he witnessed, the room around the soldier began to sway more and more.

"Almost... *there...*," Agatha heaved and pulled and grasped until finally, with one last wrench of super strength, she freed the naked screaming newborn from its mother's belly, holding it up by its ankle. She laughed, "I didn't even have to swat her! Look, Catherine!" She rested the baby, covered in its mother's blood, atop the Lady's belly, still attached by the birthing cord.

But the Lady's chest neither rose nor fell anymore and her hand no longer grasped the soldier's. He set her arm gently back down onto the table and looked at the dead Lady's

face. It was free from pain; free from the burdens of the world and to him it was the most beautiful face he'd ever looked upon. He quietly and softly closed her eyes.

Agatha looked grim as she tied off the cord of the screaming child, severing its remaining connection to its mother. She then wrapped the baby in the last few clean linens she could find and drenched a piece of nearby muslin in honey, which she then put into the baby's mouth. The baby at last fell quiet as it sucked happily at the material.

Agatha was slow to speak, sadness breaking her voice slightly, "The job you came here to do... it's finished now."

The soldier shook his head, "I didn't come here to do this. I came here to bring a criminal to justice."

"Didn't you do that?"

His expression grew stern, "I see no criminals here."

Agatha smiled slightly, "She was a woman of my people and she should be given a proper death ceremony so that she may grace the halls of Paradise."

He nodded in agreement, then asked, "How is that done?"

"We burn our warriors."

"Won't the fire cause suspicion in your neighbors?"

She laughed shortly as she gently bounced the sleeping bundle in her arms, "My neighbors are few and far between. Those that know of me would not be surprised that the 'crazy witch woman' is at her experiments again."

He nodded solemnly, "Alright then, I'll go find some wood."

It didn't take long to gather enough to build a funeral pyre for the Lady Catherine in the clearing near Agatha's home and when the last of the wood was placed upon the pile, the soldier returned to the cottage to collect Catherine. The old woman looked on sadly as he rejoined her, carrying the limp blood and silk covered body in his arms. He then placed it gently upon the pyre.

Agatha handed him the torch that she held in her free hand. "The ground is wet," she cautioned. "It may be difficult to light."

But the gods were with them that evening and as the soldier touched the fire to the wood, it caught almost immediately. He went around the pyre, lighting what he could and then returned to Agatha, the baby against her chest making noises in its sleep.

"I guess now you return a hero, hmm?" Agatha asked, unable to keep the slight venom from her voice despite the soldier's recent assistance.

He shook his head, "If they call me that, I won't accept it. Besides," he looked at her as he spoke, the flames lighting both their faces, "I have nothing to prove that I ki... that she's dead."

Agatha produced a golden ring from beneath the folds of her dress, the seal of Tyre, a large tree, on its face. "This is her ring. Show it to the Emperor, and he'll know then."

He took it, slowly, "But, shouldn't this go to the child?"

"No," Agatha shook her head firmly, "she needs no trinkets, nor amulets or other ridiculous things because she must *never* know where she comes from or her life will be full of strife."

A few hours later, as the first traces of dawn began to approach painting the sky in oranges and pinks, Agatha bound the baby with leather straps tightly to the soldier's chest - over his tunic but beneath his chain mail *hamata*.

"Do you really think this will work?" He asked with all the disbelief that claimed it wouldn't.

"Of course - or I wouldn't risk it!" Agatha pulled the straps tighter across his chest. "Remember, go straight to Sotiria in the Imperial Nursery. Mention my name and hand the baby directly over to her. She is one of my people and will know immediately that this is Lady Catherine's daughter."

"But," the soldier looked upon the sleeping babe, "shouldn't she have a name of some kind?"

"I don't know, make up something," Agatha waved a dismissive hand in the air. "But make it something Lycanian, because from here on out, that's what she must be."

"But, I'm not...," he continued to stare at the squirming bundle against his chest, thinking what name he could possibly bestow on her. He thought back to the cry she gave out when Agatha first pulled her into the world and smiled. Her loud mouth reminded him of his little sister, Alexis. He nodded, "Ok. Alexia. She'll be Alexia, then."

Agatha shrugged, "I suppose it's as good as any name. I just hope to the gods that she stays looking like her mother." She stroked the baby's head one last time.

The soldier then mounted his horse, easily, so as not to disturb the newborn.

"Can I ask," she said, handing the soldier back his cleaned *pugio*, "did her father die... as bravely?"

The soldier's eyes fell to the ground while his insides churned from the memory, "Her father died more of a warrior than I could ever be. He fought us all and in the end, it

was only through the treachery of the Decanus that he was killed." He paused, then looked at Agatha, "I only wish I had known then..."

She shrugged, "That's what life is all about: wishing that you knew then what you know now. But, one day, you will be old and cynical like me and nothing will surprise you anymore. Not even yourself." She smiled sadly, "Goodbye, little one... and goodbye to you, young one. May the gods of both our peoples ride with you this night!" Agatha then slapped the hindquarters of the horse and sent them galloping into the direction of the capital.

* * *

The Empire of Lycania was, some argued, as old as the beginning of the world. Legend told that the land had sprung up from the very place where the gods had first set down the Two Brothers upon the earth. While there were those that disputed such claims, no one would ever say that Lycania wasn't the most beautiful land that they had ever laid eyes on, full of rolling green hills and welcoming shade trees. The summers were pleasant with warm winds that blew in from the Western Sea and the winters were marked by a light dusting of snow, which retreated quickly at the first sight of spring.

From its midpoint, the Lycanian lands stretched out as far as the eye could see in every direction. The people who formed the communities within its borders were descendants from the long-ago conquered tribes that had once permeated the area before the arrival of the Two Brothers. But, despite their ancestral enmity, they now lived in relative peace with one another.

Historically speaking, the most active threats to Lycania had often come from the tribes *outside* of her borders, which consisted of supposed savages, or 'Bestials' as they were referred to in the elevated social circles of the Empire's elite. Thankfully, their attacks had been greatly reduced amid the last half of the century. For, during his reign, Gaius Quintus, the previous emperor known as the 'Peacebringer,' had forged a relative peace with most of his Bestial neighbors. While not entirely welcomed, there were now several thriving communities of Bestials within Lycania - though most had arrived by either being sold into slavery by rival tribes or, very rarely, hired on as hard laborers by the extremely wealthy; the only exception being the N'bari Moon People, the fearsome gladiatorial fighters who had arrived via the *Pax Lunas* trade agreement.

Odalia, the capital of Lycania and where the White Palace stood, was built with a large rectangular wall made of stunning white limestone that ran around the entire city.

Inside its walls stood a *forum*, or marketplace, a Temple of the Two Brothers and its high priestess, an educational academy for the children of Lycania's wealthy citizenry and an amphitheater with a circuit where the capital's main school of gladiators both trained and performed. Towards the back end of the walls was the White Palace, a shining behemoth beset by two large marble columns that were each polished to a gleaming perfection. A statue of each Brother stood in alcoves cut into the marble on either side of the entrance behind the columns while a relief of the Wolf-Mother herself looked down upon them all from her perch above the palace doors.

Within the expansive palace were libraries of scrolls and books stacked high, as well as a section of small apartments where courtly visitors stayed, plus an elaborately gilded dancing and music room, a *triclinium* dining hall, ornate community baths and elaborately landscaped garden rooms. In fact, the palace was so great in size that the entire Lycanian army was housed there, the barracks being located on multiple floors of the entire left wing. Outside of the barracks was the training yard and next to it, the Emperor's family's true source of pride: his stables, filled with horses descended from those taken in victory from the Cavalli Horse People during the Desolate Wars.

The citizens of Odalia were, for the most part, content. They had been ruled all of their lives by members of the Quintus Dynasty, which had been in power for well over one hundred and fifty years. Their most recent ruler, Gaius Tiberius Quintus, had ascended to the Emperor's seat only a decade previous. But, unlike his predecessor and father, the Peacebringer, Tiberius cared very little for the pursuit of peace. He was also uninterested in the plight of anyone who was not already a part of his court, which was made up almost entirely of Lycania's most wealthy and influential landowners.

His main desire, a trait he *had* shared with his father, was for power and the insatiable need to show it off and he exercised such displays of power by passing highly restrictive laws whenever the mood took him. Anyone who broke said laws, no matter how absurd they may have been, was found to be a traitor to the Empire and usually executed quickly without trial. After the alleged traitor's death, he would then confiscate their lands and other assets for the Empire, which often times left the lawbreaker's family destitute, forcing them to become beggars on Odalia's streets.

Tiberius' most recent laws were proving to be his most effective yet. Only months earlier he had outlawed all other gods besides the Two Brothers and the Wolf-Mother, tearing down the temples that had served the people of the land for hundreds of years. He had also recently banned the mixing of Lycanian blood with any of the Bestial tribes,

claiming that the success of Lycania depended on the purity of the bloodline of its people, as the gods themselves had intended from the beginning.

In private, his laws were frequently met with resistance by his various advisors who were constantly worried about rioting from the masses. Tiberius took their words under advisement and, in response, began to increase security on the streets of Odalia. In addition, he would frequently host multi-day feasts of free food and gladiatorial combat, known as a *munus*, in order to placate the masses and silence his critics.

High atop his White Palace, Emperor Tiberius looked out over the land. He was dressed in a crimson tunic, signifying his status as royalty, and around his waist was tied his most valued personal treasure: the Sword of Irae - its silver and jeweled sheath gleaming in the sunlight. The short-sword, a relic from another time and place, had been passed down from several generations and had served as a reminder of the Twin gods' favor, which had long ago been bestowed upon his family line.

His nine-year-old son, Spurius, also dressed in the royal crimson, paced beside him, bored with the morning's lack of events. The child busied himself by kicking loose pebbles in the direction of a pair of Bestial slaves who were preparing to patch a crack in the palace wall. They tried their best to ignore him by continuing to grind stones taken from a small pile nearby, which they planned to later heat to use as concrete.

Behind them, the Emperor's legion of ever-present servants had set up a luxurious breakfast table, consisting of Lycanian bread and wine, cheese and meat from the north, and fish from the Western Sea. It was all laid out upon a silk tablecloth, courtesy of the recently conquered Golden Men, which blew gently in the wind.

Beside the Emperor stood his legate, Timonus, the general of the Lycanian forces.

"So," the Emperor addressed him, "any word on the execution of that treasonous whore, Lady Catherine of Tyre?" He said her name as if it were poison on his lips.

"No, sire," the Legate held his head high as he answered, his elaborate feathered helmet resting under his arm, revealing a bare head of light brown hair that was just beginning to gray on the sides and top. His bright red cape, which twisted behind him in the wind, contrasted with the polished silver of his armor. Legate Timonus had been a faithful and loyal soldier in service to the Quintus Dynasty for his entire life and he planned on being so for the rest of it.

"I sincerely hope your man has not betrayed me."

"No, my liege. He would do no such thing, I assure you."

Tiberius eyed him suspiciously, "I should hope not."

The Emperor then turned and made his way to the breakfast table and sat down. His son followed suit, picking and then flicking grapes at the servants who stood around them.

Tiberius looked over at his son, "Spurius, sit up straight."

The boy scowled but did as his father requested.

The Emperor then motioned for one of the stewards that was carrying a copper pitcher of steaming hot water wrapped in cloth and asked, "Freshly boiled?"

The servant nodded.

"Good. Keep it that way."

He sent the young man back to his position along the wall with the other servants. The Emperor then beckoned the *praegustator* forward as he continued to speak to Timonus over his shoulder, "Any word from the forces in the West, then?" The food taster silently tried a bite of everything on the table as the other two men continued to converse.

"No, my liege," Timonus shook his head. "Though, if I may be so bold, should I not be fighting alongside them? I feel I would be of more use in my natural capacity as general of your armies-"

Tiberius laughed wryly, "You *are* being so bold. We have been over this, Timonus; I need you here. There have been threats on my life, as you well know, and your legionaries are *more* than capable of squashing a few rebel Bestials without you."

The taster completed his task and showing no immediate ill effects of being poisoned, was dismissed to return to his place with the others.

Timonus remained silent at Tiberius' words to him but could not stop the thoughts that ran through his mind, shouting at him that the Emperor deserved whatever should happen to him in the future.

A servant arrived and, upon seeing the Emperor, bent low. "Your Highness," he said from his bowed position, "Lord Heron is here to see you."

"Ah, yes, send him in," Tiberius brightened as he gestured in the air.

An older man, his long white hair unkempt and a day's worth of gray stubble on his face despite being dressed in the court's finery, arrived before them.

Timonus cleared his throat, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable with the new arrival, "My liege, I'm afraid I have some rather important business I need to see to."

"Of course, Legate, you are dismissed."

"Thank you," Timonus bowed his head quickly and turned away, glad for the growing distance that would soon be between him and whatever might occur upon the rooftop over the next while.

"Come, Lord Heron, sit," the Emperor indicated a chair next to him.

"Sir, my liege," the man's voice shook, "has there been any word?"

"No, my dear Lord Heron. Your daughter is *still* missing but know that I pray that she is returned quickly so that you and your wife may know peace. Some wine?"

"You are very kind, sire, but no, thank you," he bowed his head. "Again, I want to thank you for showing mercy on her. She's young and-"

Tiberius began to pour the wine for himself, "Ah, you don't have to explain the impetuosity of youth to *me*." He took a large gulp from his cup, then set it down, wiping his top lip on the back of his hand, "Lycanian wine is simply the *best* wine in the entire world." He looked directly at Lord Heron, "Now, the reason that I called you up here is that there are a few things that I am curious about."

"Anything, sire."

The Emperor stood and took a few steps over to the pile of rocks that the slaves were working with. They tried not to look at him as he took a largish stone from the top and examined it for a second before walking back to the table and placing it in Lord Heron's hand.

"Do you know what that is?"

"I fear my answer will sound as if I'm taking you for a fool."

"No, no," he smiled, "go ahead. You're free to speak as you please."

"It... it's a rock, Your Highness."

"Yes... a *rock*." He thought for a moment, and then took the stone back into his own hand. "Let me ask you another question."

"Absolutely, my liege."

He indicated his tunic, "Do you know how they get the fabric of my tunic to be such a dark red color?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid such matters... are rarely on my mind."

He laughed as he began to pace, "Now *that* is a truthful answer, my friend!" The Emperor paused for a moment, then leaned in beside Lord Heron, his hands propping him up on the tabletop, "You see, it's red like this because of the type of dye my tailors use. Would you like to know how they acquire such dye?"

"I-, er, *yes*, my lord," he humored Tiberius, despite his thoughts being solely on his missing daughter. "You have my curiosity piqued."

"You see, there is a special beetle that is harvested for the red powder that they can make from its shell. And, do you know how they get the powder?"

"No, sir-"

The Emperor stood back, nodding once to the water steward who calmly stepped forth and poured boiling water into the lap of Lord Heron. The old man howled in shock and pain as the steam rose from his burning flesh.

"First, they *boil* them." Tiberius walked behind the writhing, wailing Lord Heron, then bent down and spoke into his ear, "Then, once dried, they *crush* them." He brought the limestone rock down upon the hand of old man that was resting on top of the table, breaking his fingers and bringing forth more howls of pain as he tried to vainly pull his mangled and crushed digits away in disbelief.

Spurius looked on silently, a strange light glinting in his eye.

"Now, *why* do I ask such things?" Tiberius said again in Heron's ear.

"I... I'm afraid I do not know, my lord," he wept with disbelief.

"Because that beetle is harvested in the land of *Tyre*! As are the very rocks that built this castle! A land that *you* claim to be from!" The Emperor smashed the rock upon the ground and pulled his sword from its sheath. He then held it to Lord Heron's throat, "Now, tell me where you are really from."

The lord swallowed, his entire being full of fear while he cradled his broken hand even as the flesh upon his legs continued to burn, "I-I don't know what you mean, sir."

Tiberius pulled sword closer against Lord Heron's throat, shouting, "*You're a treacherous liar!* Tell me where you are really from or I will have your entire family killed!"

Lord Heron spoke at last, his words barely above a whisper as they cracked from his throat, "Th-Thera.... my-my lord."

"Thera? *Thera?* You really do take me for a fool!" Then, without a moment's hesitation, Tiberius slit Lord Heron's throat. The stunned body of the former lord sat for a moment, sputtering, before falling forward lifelessly onto one of the breakfast plates.

The Emperor sheathed his bloodied sword and returned to his seat. Then, as the thick warm blood of Lord Heron began to pool around the legs of the table, he looked at Spurius, "Strength and firmness, son, *that's* how you lead. Strength... and firmness."

Spurius, taking the advice in stride, looked quizzically at his father, "What is Thera?"

"Thera is a fairy story, told to the children of the lower classes in order to convince them that they can somehow be better than the worthless rubbish they were born to be." He laughed derisively, "It *was* once a true land of riches but the gods wiped it clean from this world - and I have the sword that proves it! I don't know where this man is from but it is *not* Thera." He took a mouthful of bread and as he chewed, spoke to one of his servants, "Have

the legion round up his family. See what you can get out of them but if they tell you the same, then kill them. In fact, kill them anyway. I have no room for liars and traitors in my court."

* * *

"Sixteen years..." the man muttered to himself, his words heavy with remorse as he sat upon a fallen log that rested beside a sculpted memorial in the middle of the Aulus forest.

His name was Tacitus and he cut a forlorn figure sitting there, his long black and gray hair wrapped to its end with a piece of leather. His slightly wrinkled face, painted in the traditional decorative ink-swirled designs of the Cavalli people, told the story of a man who had been broken long ago.

The wind lightly rustled the vest made of fur pelts that he wore over a simple linen shirt and brown breeches. It then whirled red and golden leaves around his suede boots, fluttering the fringe that ringed their tops as it did.

Behind him, Tacitus heard the not entirely unexpected crunch of leaves beneath someone else's feet and knew instantly who had arrived to disrupt his mourning. The new visitor, larger in stature and possessing a booming voice that carried throughout the dense forest, demanded "What are you doing here, *Cauda*?" He spat out the last word like a curse and it may well have been, for it was the old word meaning 'coward.' To a Cavalli, there was no greater insult than being called a coward.

"Same as you, Vibius." Tacitus didn't to look up as his gaze remained locked onto the moss-covered statue.

"I find it odd that you would pay your respects to my wife. Especially when it is your fault she is dead." Vibius stepped forward, his face covered in similar ink designs as Tacitus', although his signified his allegiance to the Little Fish village of the Cavalli. "*Cauda*," he repeated, "you are not supposed to be here."

Tacitus stood and the other man reached for the heavy long-sword at his side. Tacitus looked into Vibius' eyes, coolly, "I won't fight you." He looked back at the memorial stone, "Not here. Not in front of her."

"You won't fight because you are a coward. You do not even possess a sword! Your brother should've ended your life years ago."

"Perhaps...," Tacitus knelt down and began to clean the moss off of the stone. His lips parted and he began to whisper a silent prayer to the gods that he was no longer entirely sure he believed in.

Vibius' patience with Tacitus was showing signs of wearing thin, "I want you to leave. *Now*. Because I *will* fight you in front of her, sword or no sword."

"We are both Cavalli, Vibius," Tacitus stood again, "therefore we are brothers in the eyes of the gods but," he shook his head, "I should have never allowed her to marry you." He cast a stern but silent glance at the other man, "*That* is my regret." He then began to walk away but before he left the clearing entirely, he stopped and turned, "You were no better at protecting her than I was." His eyes fell on the white stone, "Goodbye, my daughter. Until another year has passed."

He reluctantly left the clearing and took to his horse, a two-year-old bay he'd just received from a neighboring village as payment for his "good medicine." He pulled himself up onto its back and with a last look behind him, began the return trek to his home in Two-Crows.

As the horse plodded rhythmically along throughout the dense forest, he pushed the thoughts of Vibius from his mind and wondered, instead, what he should name the mare. He wanted something regal yet simple. For once, long ago, the Cavalli, or Horse People as they were known throughout the world, had lived alongside herds and herds of the equines. They had run wild in ever-shifting masses of browns and reds upon the Lower Plains before the Desolate Wars had rendered the grasslands into a useless desert and the Lycanian forces had brought most of them back to Odalia as spoils of war.

The Desolate Wars had been a pointless endeavor brought about by Lycanian empirical greed. They had claimed that the Cavalli were Lycanians by birth and blood and therefore the Lower Plains, and everything beneath it, rightfully belonged to the Empire. Meanwhile, the Cavalli, who believed they were descended from only *one* of the Two Brothers, disputed their claim. In the end, the Desolate Wars had brought about no true victors and was never officially resolved, though it did mar the once beautiful landscape forever.

Both sides of the conflict publicly blamed each other for the devastation of the Lower Plains, though no one could offer an explanation as to why it happened. The Cavalli, a naturally superstitious people, believed that the desertification had actually been the work of a *venefica* sorceress who had wanted to impress her lover, the Lycanian emperor Gaius, by poisoning the ground.

Whatever the source of the destruction, the Cavalli were forced to retreat into the forests of Aulus, leaving what remained of the Lower Plains a *terra nullius*, or a "no man's land." Then, as the desertification spread throughout the grasslands, neither the Cavalli nor the Lycanians laid any more claim to the thirty-mile stretch of arid wasteland and thus it was referred to as the Unclaimed Desert.

The Unclaimed Desert had come to serve as an unofficial armistice for the Lycanian side, since no man that had attempted to cross it had ever come back alive. The Cavalli, on the other hand, already well versed with living in harmony with their environment, soon learned the secrets of the desert and occasionally ventured as far as the White Palace, either to scout or to pull childish pranks meant to keep the guards on their toes. This didn't happen very often, though, as the Cavalli superstitions made them terrified of the Desert's "bad medicine."

The transition of the Cavalli people from the freedom of a lifestyle of living out on the open plains to one of being forced to become forest dwellers was not an easy one and a group of rebels eventually rose up amongst the different branches of the Horse People in the intervening decade. They had begun to claim that certain families within their own people had worked with the *venefica* in order to encourage the desert to spread, though no reason why was ever given. And, thus the Cavalli then fell into a civil war, which lasted well over three years.

It was in that war that Tacitus lost his wife, Valeria, and daughter, Tacita Valeriani, whom they called Valeri. Valeri was only a young girl of sixteen when he'd arranged for her to marry Vibius, an older son of the neighboring Little Fish's village elder, hoping it would bring her a comfortable life and peace between the two peoples. Initially, she was angry with him when he told her of his decision but, being a good and dutiful daughter, she went ahead with the nuptials. Because of the status of her new husband, which, to her relief, kept him busy and away from home, she was frequently allowed to visit her mother back in Two-Crows, which is where she found herself when the village was invaded.

Normally a peaceful village, Two-Crows held no obvious strategic advantages for an attacking band of rebels and had stayed relatively safe and hidden away during the early part of the civil war. Because of this, Two-Crows felt comfortable with sending every man over the age of thirteen to fight for their side in the war - including the village elders. They embraced the war with all the passionate vigor that men often do when fighting for a cause they believe in.

Well, most men. Tacitus, a young man of around thirty-two at the time, was not a fighter. Rather, he was a *medicus*, or one who practiced good medicine and felt that volunteering to murder men, despite the cause, went against everything he stood for. He owned no sword and carried only a dagger for survival reasons. The others of his village gave him a hard time but always quickly shut their mouths whenever he healed them and their children from a litany of different maladies.

He had three strong older brothers, and one younger, that went in his stead. They, like everyone, believed that the village being left behind would be of little interest to those fighting on the other side. But in war, humans often become little more than beasts and late in the night, Two-Crows was ambushed.

Tacitus awoke to the screams of the women and children of the village. Leaving his own wife and daughter secured in his home, he ran out to see the enemy rebels attacking. To his horror, they slaughtered the ponies first, then began to set fire to the village homes built in amongst the trees. He watched helplessly as they pulled children from their beds and murdered them in front of him.

Filled with anger, Tacitus ran up to a group of the rebels, trying, but unable to stop them. He was repeatedly flung back, until the rebel leader, Otho, caught sight of him. Coming upon Tacitus fallen form, he laughed while the carnage continued behind him, "Why look, they *did* leave a man here. Or did they not?" Otho dragged his sword down the front of Tacitus' breeches.

Tacitus swallowed, the forest ground cold and wet beneath him.

"Where's your sword, *fool*?" Otho pulled his own weapon back up towards Tacitus' bobbing throat.

"I don't-I don't have one..."

Otho cocked his head to the side, narrowing his eyes questioningly, "Why did they leave you here?"

"I-I am not a fighter. I would've been of very little use to them."

"Aye," Otho laughed low and darkly, "you are of very little use here as well. For what is a man without a sword? He is a woman and thus shall be treated as such! Grab him, tie him up before we burn them-"

"Wait!" Tatius yelled out to Otho as two of his Cavalli brothers grabbed each one of his arms. "If death awaits me, at least let me die knowing why you have attacked us! We offer you nothing of value! We are not a farming community, we're too near the desert to

offer protection and we're too far away from the fighting to give you an advantage! Why would you attack us, your brothers, your fellow man?"

Otho took a few steps closer to Tacitus so that he was only a breath from his face, "You are *no* man. Neither are you the brother of Otho the Rebel." A scream of a woman could be heard in the distance as a grin slowly spread across his face, "There are other things to fight for besides victory. Pleasures and riches, *my brother*. And, now?" He stood back, his arms outstretched, "I will take pleasure in *your* riches. Tie him up!"

Tacitus tried to fight but it was of no use, the men overpowered him quickly and bound him to two trees that sat in the middle of the village, his arms stretched far apart. Throughout the night, as they became drunker on the ale stores they had found, the rebels intermittently beat him, some slicing his face and body with their swords while others heated their daggers in fires and laid them against his skin. They beat him so much that Tacitus' eyes became swelled to the point where he could hardly see; they shattered his jaw, breaking some of his teeth. The torture continued for hours and the only thing that helped him live through it was the thought of his wife and daughter, for he'd not seen either in the pile of bodies that had begun to form in front of him.

As dawn broke, some of the men, still drunk on stolen ale, full on stolen food and spent on stolen women mounted their horses and began to disperse. Tacitus barely clung to what little life he had left inside of him while Otho shouted for the last of the bodies to be brought out of the smoldering houses and the few survivors there were, to be left to die.

It was then that Tacitus caught sight of his wife and daughter's bodies being dragged haphazardly out of their lodge and added to the pile. Their clothes were in shreds and their faces bloodstained, though still unmistakably recognizable. He let out a cry of such woeful agony upon seeing them in that state that it reverberated throughout the entire forest, causing the crows in the trees above to awaken and entwine their cries with his.

The few rebels who remained were ordered to set the bodies alight, leaving Tacitus to wail himself until his voice cracked. Not only did he mourn the loss of his family but also the fact that the Cavalli forbade the burning of their dead, believing it prevented them the ability to walk into the halls of Heaven.

When he heard the continued anguish of his captive, Otho walked over, a smirk across his mouth as he cut Tacitus free of the ropes that held him, "Now then, perhaps you will carry a sword in the future?"

Tacitus was barely coherent; his eyes had completely swollen shut and were crusted with the dried blood that had earlier spilled down his face. "Kill me," he whispered from his

cracked, dry lips, "slow or fast, Otho, it doesn't matter. Kill me now. I beg by the blood that we share."

"So soon after you've learned your lesson? Just what kind of teacher would that make me?" He then ripped Tacitus vest and shirt apart and produced a dagger. "No, no, *Brother*, you must stay alive to tell the others about the lesson you have learned today! Here," he pressed the dagger against the skin of his captive's chest, "I'll give you a reminder." He carved the letter 'C' into Tacitus skin and the blood of the wound flowed down the front of his breeches.

"Look, you even *bleed* like a woman," Otho laughed heartily as he stood and ordered his men, "leave him by the bodies. Let the men of Two-Crows punish him in their own way."

The day stretched on, but Tacitus had no way of knowing how long as he was unable to remain conscious for any length of the time. At some point during one of his rare moments of consciousness, the men of Two-Crows returned home.

Already disheartened by the numbers they'd lost during their campaign, the bedraggled and horseless men stood in shock at the scene before them. Slowly, as the initial impact wore away, they began to sift through the rubble, going over it in the hope that they would find survivors. It was during this search that one of the men discovered Tacitus, bloody and dirty, partially hidden by the ash pile, which had blown across his body.

Severus, the only one of Tacitus' four brothers to return home alive from battle, ran over quickly to aid him. He rinsed his brother's bloodied face with water from his own waterskin. "Tacitus? Tacitus, speak if you're able."

"Kill me, Otho...kill me and be done with it. Gods forgive me, please forgive me," he whispered, his mind temporarily gone from him.

"It's me, Brother, it's me, Severus."

"Kill me, kill me, Otho," he whispered over and over, until there was very little sound coming from his lips. Severus then hoisted the beaten and broken body of his brother upon his shoulder and began to walk toward the remains of his own home - the outside of which was badly burned while the inside had remained largely untouched. Upon seeing him do so, the village men began to gather around.

One of them shouted, "Is he alive?"

Severus didn't look back at the man as he answered, "He may be."

"Then ask him why he didn't fight!"

"Yeah!" Another chimed in, "Why is the coward alive? A true man would've fought! He would've died with honor!"

Still another, "He is a true coward!"

Severus walked into his house and laid his brother upon his own bed. The villagers, still in their war coverings and paint, crowded around the gutted doorway, all talking at once. Severus turned and glared at them as he pushed his way through, "Get away from my home!"

The oldest village Elder, Seneca, a man of white hair and frail body who had nevertheless joined them in fighting the rebels, addressed Severus, "Tacitus should face trial. The Cavalli are not men of weakness."

Severus nostrils flared with anger, "I have lost three brothers already, I will *not* lose another."

The crowd grew agitated and began asking for Severus to be reprimanded as well.

Frustrated with those he had just fought beside not even a fortnight ago, he looked out over the crowd and shouted, "You know me! Who am I?"

The crowd mumbled.

"*Who am I?*" he demanded at the top of his lungs.

"The Chaos-bringer!" Someone shouted back.

"The Giant Killer!"

"The Sword Bearer!"

"The Defeater of the Rebels!"

"That's right! I have many names as I am the bravest among you. I have shown in battle that I have no fear and have led you in many victories and given you stories that you will pass on for generations to come. If I have no fear of the Giants, no fear of the Rebels and no fear of death, what makes you think I will be afraid of *you*?" Severus pulled his sword from its sheath and with two hands upon its hilt, lifted the sword high, then plunged it deep into the ground before Seneca.

"From where my sword sits, and everything behind it, is now mine. What once belonged to my brothers is now mine. I take their dwellings and pledge to protect this village as I bear my brother's cowardly mantle upon my own back. But, I swear by the *gods*, that if any of you cross the land where this sword has marked without being asked, I will thrust it through your hearts." He looked around the crowd, his chest rising and falling as he seethed, his eyes landing on the Elder.

The Elder spoke slow and loud, "I agree with the Sword Bearer. His bravery in our recent battles has proven that the gods are on his side and as long as he aligns with us, we shall honor his request. Tend to your women and children, those of you that still have them.

If you have been among those that have lost here today, we will perform the purification ceremony tonight and plead with the gods to allow them into Heaven." The crowd was silent, but unmoving. Seneca shouted, "That is all for now, tend to your flocks!"

When the crowds had dissipated, Seneca spoke to Severus, "To bear your brother's shame will not be easy."

"Yet, it will be so," was the only response the warrior gave as he turned away and went back into his home.

In the many weeks that followed, Severus tended to Tacitus, nursing him back to health and even using his brother's own advice for which remedies to apply when he was able to speak again. But, despite the fact that he loved his remaining brother very much, Severus couldn't deny that there was an underlying resentment that he felt towards Tacitus' cowardice during the attack - though he would never say so aloud, even as he spent the next generation trying to redeem his family's bloodline.

Meanwhile, in the decade and a half that had followed the Cavalli Rebellion, the people of Two-Crows had rebuilt. Only the fewest of trees still bore the scars of the events that had occurred and where the ashes of the dead were once piled, there now stood a Willow tree, whose branches hung low with the sadness of its weeping. Tacitus rode his new horse into the village and while the people had never quite fully accepted him again, he was happy to be back in the place that he called home.

The village was quiet as Tacitus entered, for most of her inhabitants were away honoring their lost ancestors for the Day of Remembrances. In the midst of the silence, he could hear the telltale sound of his brother laboring hard in the distance, working on what he hoped would soon house the village's own Order of the Sword, an ancient guild that had once thrived eons ago within the Cavalli.

Tacitus tied off the horse in front of his home, which had been rebuilt upon its old site. Like the other buildings in the Two-Crows village, it was a half-barrel shaped wooden structure with a thatched roof that went all the way down to the ground. It was located between two trees and its outside was decorated with various Cavalli symbols meaning good medicine and health.

"Hello, Brother," an unexpected voice spoke as Tacitus tended his horse.

He turned at the musical sound, unable to hide the smile that spread too easily upon his face at the appearance of his very pregnant sister-in-law, Nona.

"Hello, Nona, how are you getting along?"

She held a basket of herbs against her side, her dark red hair piled in a mound of braids atop her head as her green eyes seemed more tired than normal, "The time grows closer." Nona patted her swollen belly, "It's a boy this time."

He laughed, "So sure?"

"Yes," she smiled back, "very. He doesn't fight as hard as Aelia, though." The light in her eyes dulled slightly as she tried to maintain her smile, "I do hope Severus will be pleased."

Tacitus glanced across the grove towards his brother and watched as the other man set stones into the wall that would one day surround a new set of barracks, "He will be pleased, regardless." He looked back at Nona, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. "Well, I-I have a remedy setting up that I need to get back to."

"Did you find any new plants while you were away?"

"No." He smiled again, "I will probably need to venture out into the desert for some new ones one of these days."

Her face paled slightly, "Please don't, Tacitus, there is dark magic there."

"Nona, you know I don't believe-"

"Please," her hand rested on his chest and his heart began to pound at her touch. "I would never recover if you... if something happened to you."

He closed his eyes, "Nona, please don't. I can't."

She pulled her hand away, sadness touching her eyes, "You have your brother's honor. It's the one thing I *do* love in him." Her eyes drifted towards her husband as he continuously worked, then back to Tacitus. She tried to change the subject, though her smile was still full of sorrow, "I've left a new book of forest vegetation on your table."

"Thank you, Nona. We will speak again." He turned away and left her there, reluctantly, as he walked into his house. Once inside he saw the book she had mentioned, "*A History of the Plants of the Aulus Forest*" resting on his front room table. He smiled upon seeing it and lifted it up slowly, admiring its simple cover. As he did, a small folded piece of paper slipped out onto the table. He picked it up and opened it, reading to himself, "My heart and soul are yours, always... even if this body is not." Tacitus crumbled the paper up immediately and tossed it into the fire burning in the hearth.

He took a deep breath and cleared his mind, then walked into the back room of his house. He set the book on top of a nearby shelf, which was already overflowing with tomes of various shapes, sizes and origins. A large heavy oaken table rested in the center of the small room with a thick rough-hewn cloth thrown across the top of it, outlining whatever

mess lay beneath. On top of the cloth rested several reports from the scouts that his brother had sent out across the land. He took a certain pride in the fact that only the Cavalli knew the secrets of the desert and, according to one of the reports, it looked as if it would be that way for a while, yet. The scout in the Mountains of Selene reported that the N'bari wished to continue their treaty with the Cavalli for another year, while the scout to the west had nothing to report, as there was nothing out in the west except for a few small villages. The scout to the north in Odalia said that the Lycanians still openly declared that the Forest of Aulus was rightfully theirs.

Tacitus nodded to himself as he read. This was what he wanted. He hoped, secretly, that the Lycanians would *always* claim the Cavalli land, for that way he may one day have the chance to redeem himself.

He threw back the cloth that covered the table and revealed a scaled model of Odalia and the White Palace. He smirked as he leaned over it, shifting a few things to reflect the new info gleaned from one of the scout's more detailed reports.

One day he would lead a rebellion and one day Lycania would fall. Tacitus subconsciously placed a hand over his chest, feeling the scar beneath his shirt. He would redeem himself, one way or another, and make his family's name worthy again.

* * *

Juko had a headache and the constant jostling of the wooden cage-cart in which he was sat in was doing him no favors. It shook loudly next to his ears and had done so for the entire duration of the journey from the Crystal Port on the Eastern Shore. He was also sharing the small space within the cage with nine other men, only two of which were from the land of Noba as he was. The rest seemed an even-handed collection of Golden and Hairy Men.

The walls of Lycania's capital rose up ahead of the horse drawn cart and even Juko had to admit it was an awesome sight to behold. As a N'bari born in the Mountains of Selene, he'd certainly seen his share of breathtaking beauty and now could easily add Odalia to that list.

The driver of the cart pulled the horses to a halt when they arrived at the front gate. As he did, a guard walked over and addressed him, "Slaves again, Leonas?"

"Nope. *These* boys are gladiators!" he proclaimed proudly, handing his official papers over for inspection.

The guard was pleasantly surprised, "Oh, excellent! So, how does this group look? What do you think their chances are?"

The driver shrugged, "Compared to the last ones?" He shook his head, "Well, none of 'em are as big as the other guys I hauled in before."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they can't fight!"

The driver let out a loud laugh, "Yessir, true enough!"

"Alright, everything looks good here. You can go on through, then." He handed the driver back his papers and rattled the cage as it went by, "See you boys in the arena! Hope you make me lots of money!"

Juko remained silent as he sat in the back of the cage, watching the scene unfold before him as the others good-naturedly laughed along with the guard. He hadn't engaged with the others for the entire trip because, unlike them, he wasn't there of his own free will.

A few weeks previous, word had reached Noba that his brother, Suna, had been arrested on the ridiculous premise of breaking a Lycanian law by having an illicit relationship with a woman from the Empire. Juko's father, the N'bari chieftain of their clan, had sent him in search of Suna. He had hoped to avoid an international incident and so opted to send his son in as a gladiatorial recruit, just as Suna had been. While it was true that Juko had trained by his brother's side growing up, he had never wanted to be a gladiator himself, instead opting for a life of service within his clan. But, despite his reservations, he knew he would try by any means necessary to retrieve Suna for his father.

After they had passed through the gates, the cage then continued to rattle through the streets of Odalia as her citizens came away from their tasks and obligations to cheer the arrival of the new gladiators. The others in the cage played up to the crowds, flexing their muscles, pantomiming fights with one another and generally reveling in the moment that they had been trained for their entire lives. Juko turned around and looked over his shoulder, glancing at the cheering throngs through the wooden slats of the cage. He saw a lady pull up her skirts, revealing to him that she wore nothing underneath as she gave him a wink. Juko quickly turned away, his expression stern.

The driver carried them around the market once more before finally leading them to the Amphitheater. When they arrived at its entrance, the driver gleefully called out, "Open the gates!"

Juko looked up at the towering, rounded structure and despite his attempt to remain stoic, his heart leapt at the sheer size of it. It reminded him of being home and looking up at the mountain peaks that surrounded his village.

Along with his awe, Juko also couldn't fight the lingering incredulity that a N'bari could ever be so welcomed into the capital of the Lycanian Empire without having his own head handed to him. The two lands were ancient enemies and it wasn't until the Peacebringer Emperor had forged the *Pax Lunas* treaty that they were ever able to even co-exist in such close proximity to one another.

For the Lycanians, in their fear, saw the ancient N'bari Moon People across the waters to the far southeast as a bloodthirsty Bestial tribe that were capable of little more than animal savagery in their minds. They were known throughout the land for their fierce hand-to-hand combat fighting skills, large size and indomitable wills. This made for a formidable enemy to the Lycanian armies, who were small in stature by comparison and used to fighting from a distance with arrows and spears.

Emperor Gaius' original intention when he set forth from the White Palace towards Noba was not peace but had been actually to conquer the Spice Route - a main supply artery that led across the ocean and directly into the N'bari Mountains. Had he been successful, the conquest would have cut off the N'bari's sole existing trade route. With it in his possession, Gaius would've been able to levy a tax on all items coming in and out Noba, as well as control the prices he paid for his imports.

Unfortunately for the Lycanian forces, the ensuing battle was bloody and full of casualty. When his imminent demise became inevitable, Gaius switched strategies and offered the N'bari chieftains a compromise: Lycania would trade its many sought-after spices, wheat and wines in exchange for fighters from Noba, which they could then train as gladiators to serve as entertainment for the people of the Empire. The bloodsport of gladiatorial combat had become increasingly in demand in the capital and brought in much gold to the Lycanian coffers. The promoters of the sport had recently discovered that the more exotic the fighter, the higher price people paid to witness the carnage - the Moon People being the most lucrative. The N'bari agreed to the terms and the treaty was signed.

The new gladiators rode past the entrance of the Amphitheater, the wheels of the cart kicking up the dust of the circuit grounds. As they came to a stop, the large heavy doors of the structure closed behind them with a resounding *thud* that Juko could feel within his chest while, despite the thickness of the walls surrounding them, he could still hear the people outside cheering their arrival

"Well, men," the driver jumped down from the carriage and walked around to open the cage, "welcome to your new home!"

The men excitedly exited the cage, leaving Juko, who had waited until the cart was empty before he, too, climbed out. When he did so and, at last, stood upon the ground of the arena, Juko felt nothing but wonderment at what he saw before him. The Amphitheater was huge, maybe even large enough to house his entire village. The seats that surrounded the circuit began at the ground level and went upwards in a diagonal as they rose higher. The dirt of the arena had been used so often that he could see ruts carved into the terrain from the many chariot races that had been held there.

The driver walked up to Juko and placed an arm around his shoulders. It was laughable to anyone watching as the driver was very short, with a large belly and Juko was tall and muscular.

"Did you know," the driver began, "that they can even close up the doors and fill this place with water? Watched them do it myself last year with these small boats that they used to recreate the Battle of the West Sea against the Icanthians."

Juko looked at the driver, who seemed unaware that the N'bari wasn't sharing in his enthusiasm.

The driver patted him on the back, "Well, pick up your things and get in there. They'll take the best beds before you know it."

Juko glanced around to see where the driver was indicating and saw that his hand pointed towards a double set of metal doors that led to the gladiators' underground quarters. Juko nodded and muttered a polite, "Thank you," as he followed the others.

Unlike most of the men he had seen so far, Juko had brought nothing with him on his journey. All he possessed were the clothes on his back, which included an extra long black tunic studded geometrically with teeny bits of metal mined from the mountains of his homeland. The tunic rested over a thick set of black breeches, which were stuffed into a heavy pair of dark leather boots. He also carried no weapon as he had been trained in the N'bari style of hand-to-hand fighting since birth and had never felt the need.

Once through the heavy doors, he had to wait for his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the room. Every few feet, brass braziers hung from the ceiling against bricked columns, casting little light in the room. Beds lined both sides of the long tunnel-like area, which ended in a small alcove in the back. He walked slowly, eyeing each bed and wondered which had been his brother's.

Juko made his way to the alcove where a small window with iron bars had been set near the ceiling. The last two beds were located there, placed against the back wall so that they faced into the rest of the room, unlike the other beds that lined the sidewalls and faced

each other. He picked the empty bed on the left and sat upon it. It was surprisingly soft and felt unnatural compared to his stone-based bed at home, which he had covered in a thick pile of straw and animal hides. He wasn't entirely sure how his sleep would fare upon the softness of the new bed but reminded himself that it was only temporary.

"You're from the north, aren't you?" A voice spoke to him in his native Noban tongue. He looked up at the entrance to the alcove and saw a very large man, his skin so dark that were it not for the window behind Juko casting light into the room, he would've been hard to discern in the shadows.

Juko stood and gave a slight, respectful bow, "Yes, I am."

"Grasshopper Clan?"

He smiled the restrained smile of one who was used to performing ambassadorial duties, "That is correct."

The other man nodded and Juko couldn't help but notice the thickness of his neck as he spoke, "I thought you light-skins up north didn't usually send fighters."

"Light-skin" would seem a misnomer to most Lycanians had they overheard its usage, for even though Juko was far lighter than the other man, he still appeared darker than the average resident of Odalia.

"Yes, that's true."

The other man looked at him slightly suspiciously for a moment, then eased into a bright smile, "My name is T'tembo, I am from the Lion Clan of the south."

"I am Juko."

"Well, Juko, I will be your neighbor," he indicated the other well lived-in bed area beside him in the alcove.

Juko nodded and offered another slight smile, which then turned into a frown as he sat back down, having momentarily forgotten about the discomfort of the bed.

T'tembo laughed, "Yes, the beds are difficult to get used to. They use bird feathers, believe it or not!"

"It is a very odd notion," Juko said and pressed down on the bed, feeling the feathers shift beneath his hand.

"You know, we had another fighter from your clan. He was much bigger than you, though. His name was Suna, do you know him?"

Juko's heart stopped, "He was here?"

"Yes, so you do know of him?"

"He's my brother. I heard he was arrested!"

The other man nodded glumly, "He was but no one knows what's happened since."

Juko stood, "Where is he being held?"

"The Palace, I would think."

Juko turned to leave the alcove, walking quickly towards the doors of the living quarters but T'tembo called out to him before he reached them, "That is not a good idea, Juko."

"You do not understand," he arrogantly spat back at him, "I have to find my brother; that is why I am here."

"Then, you won't get very far."

"And why's that?" Juko asked, slightly annoyed.

He answered matter-of-factly, "Because the Amphitheater is locked."

Juko seemed undaunted, "Then I'll just ask them to unlock it."

T'tembo laughed a hearty, deep laugh, "You can't. You're a *gladiator* now."

"So? Then they'll respect me all the-"

"No. Let me rephrase: You are a *slave* now."

T'tembo's words hit Juko like a hard punch to the gut. He stepped towards the other man, "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, they can dress it up all they want, call it 'fighters' or 'gladiators' or whatever but we are slaves to the Lycanian Empire. Once those doors outside shut, they also locked. Your place is here and you can't leave."

"No, that can't be," Juko shook his head. "The recruiter-"

"Everything they told us during recruitment is a lie. Very few fighters survive to get their freedom. And the big house and the beautiful women they promised? I've been here two years and *this*," he pointed back to his bed, "is my big beautiful house. I barely make enough from the fights to pay my room and board and I am currently undefeated."

"No," Juko shook his head, "that can't be right. The *Pax Lunas*-"

"The *Pax Lunas* wasn't worth the papyrus it was written on." He placed a meaty hand on Juko's shoulder, "Look at us, my friend, we are *all* slaves." T'tembo turned Juko to face the other men who were laughing and talking excitedly with one another about their future conquests as he concluded, "they just don't know it yet."

"But-"

The heavy metal doors to the quarters opened and an older man, dressed in gray Lycanian robes and carrying a horsehair flywhisk, entered with a much younger and attractive male, dressed in pastels. The older man's rough expression was set very stern as

he looked over everyone in the room, swishing the flywhisk at either side of his face while he walked.

T'tembo whispered to Juko as if it had meant something, "That's Euric, the Vandal."

"Hello, men," he addressed them, his voice rough and gravelly but with a showman's timbre. "My name is Euric and I am your *lanista*." He paused in front of a short but stout Hairy Man, "Your *owner*." He continued walking, swatting at unseen flies on either side of his face, "I'm in charge of your training. I also set up your fights and," he paused before Juko and looked him up and down, "I'm in charge of arranging your funerals." He turned from Juko and continued to address the other gladiators, "The rules here are simple. First, don't die. Then again, if you do die, I suppose the other rules don't matter. We don't bring women here. If you fancy the brothels, I will have Leonas make a trip once a week to cart you off to the Ala District to take care of your needs. You are not allowed outside the walls of the Amphitheater without reason. You see, those people out there?" he indicated the doors with his flywhisk, "they may love you in the arena but they'll hate you in the streets."

He paced as he continued to speak, "We train everyday. Meals are set and we eat them together. Laundry is done once a week, unless you die, then your clothes are taken and sent back to your families." He stopped and looked at them as if trying to remember anything he had forgotten in his welcoming speech, "Oh and disputes and disagreements are handled out there," he indicated the doors again, "in the arena. We do not bring them in here." He looked around the quarters again, "Well, I believe that is all. Enjoy your off time for the moment for tomorrow begins training." Euric walked away but Juko called out to him before he could reach the doors, "Wait, *sir!*"

"Sir?" he turned, a slight grin on his face. "Well, haven't we been raised properly." Euric narrowed his eyes as he studied Juko further, "You know, you... look very familiar. Have we met before?"

"Yes, no - I mean, that is what I need to speak to you about." Juko hesitated a moment before continuing, "I... I'm not sure that I should be here. No, I *shouldn't* be here. I came as a favor to my father, to find my brother."

Euric laughed, "You shouldn't be here? What do you mean you *shouldn't* be here? There is no one here that shouldn't be here. If so," he looked into Juko's dark eyes with his own blue ones, "then they are a fool. You *are* here and you are here until you die."

"But, sir, I need to find my brother-"

The *lanista* was impatient, "And just who is this brother? Why should I even know him?"

"He is Suna, son of Mutebe, chieftain of the Grasshopper Clan in Noba."

The Vandal's face fell. He closed his eyes and shook his head, "I'm... I'm sorry to inform you, son, but your brother... is dead."

Juko began to shake with the revelation in the other man's words. "What?" he gasped when he could at last find a voice with which to do so.

Euric nodded, "He died not long ago... and for that I truly *am* sorry."

Juko fought back the rush of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him as his world fell apart. He lifted his head with a defiant lilt, "Then I must retrieve his body and return to my father."

"Son," Euric placed a sympathetic hand on his arm, "even if I knew where they were keeping his body, you cannot leave."

Juko's stared around the room in disbelief, at last becoming aware of the bars that were set into the windows that surrounded him, "What do you mean?"

The *lanista* looked into the young N'bari's eyes, "There are only two ways that you may cease being a gladiator: you either earn your freedom in the dust of the arena... or you die trying."

* * *

Kaeso was exhausted, as he had never ridden so far for so long in all of his life. He had not eaten or slept since leaving Odalia the previous day; not even after he had stumbled upon Agatha's cottage during the night. He continued to ride, despite the ache of his muscles as he clung to his horse. Meanwhile, the baby Alexia was still carefully tucked away behind his *hamata*, having slept most of the ride - he only hoped she would remain sleeping for a little while longer.

Suddenly, Odalia came into view and upon seeing its brilliant white walls Kaeso pushed his horse harder. He knew the mare was just as tired as he was but if she would just give him these last few meters, he would reward her with extra parsnips at the stables.

As he neared the capital's walls, Kaeso felt a mixture of both joy and terror for while he had safely made it home, he still had to pass through the gates without being questioned and *then* find his way through the White Palace to the Imperial Nursery.

Kaeso slowed his horse at the gate and was immediately greeted by one of the guards he was familiar with, "You've returned, I see."

"Yes; exhausted but yes."

"The Decanus wants to see you, *immediately*."

"Oh?" Kaeso panicked slightly, "I-I have to secure my horse first and then wash the road dirt off -"

The guard shrugged dismissively, "It's your funeral."

He opened the doors and let Kaeso through. The soldier and his secret slumbering bundle rode through the market, weaving in and out of the stalls in order to avoid stopping and speaking with as many people as he could. He passed the Temple of the Two Brothers and offered a quick prayer of protection as he did. To his relief, Alexia remained asleep as they then rode towards the White Palace's stables. Kaeso was halted before entering by another guard minding the stables, "*Salve*, Kaeso. You know the Decanus is looking for you?"

"Yes, I heard. Just putting my horse up. She rode all night, so I thought she deserved a res-"

"Alright, go on through, then."

Kaeso led his horse into the stable area and dismounted. The baby sighed loudly as he did and he froze in terror for a second. Then, after a moment, when it became clear that no one else had heard the sound, he took a deep breath and led his horse to the stable. He passed the reins to the boy on duty, telling him, "Brush her down, give her plenty to drink and extra feed."

The boy nodded and Kaeso continued his cautious trek through the back entrance into the barracks of the Lycanian forces. He took another deep breath and nervously twiddled his fingers down by his sides as he walked into the highly restricted, heavily armed area. Kaeso tried to remember the layout of the Palace past the barracks. If he remembered correctly, the Imperial Nursery wasn't too far away from where he currently stood.

He walked through the large marble-arched hallway and heard the din of the barracks around him as the patrol shifts prepared to change over for the afternoon watch. He heard another sleepy gurgle from the baby and again prayed to the gods for their protection. Kaeso's heart pounded so hard within his chest that he was sure everyone could hear it echoing throughout the halls.

Please, please, please, please... he pleaded silently to the gods, telling himself that it was only a few more steps and he would be away from the barracks. After that, it was just one more hallway to the left, a short right and then-

"*Milite* Kaeso!" The Decanus stepped into view in front of him.

Kaeso's stomach dropped to his knees and his eyes widened.

"You were ordered to report to me immediately," the Decanus was a tall imposing man, with low, thick eyebrows and the coldest set of blue eyes that the young soldier had ever seen on another human being. "Why have you not done so?"

"I-I-" Kaeso stuttered helplessly.

The Decanus shook his head, "I'll let it go this time because I have more pressing matters to attend. Were you successful?"

"Y-yes," Kaeso swallowed deeply and felt around in his belt pouch for the ring. He found it quickly and handed it over to the Decanus with a shaking hand. "Here-here is my proof, sir."

The Decanus took it and examined it closely, "Ah, yes - that is *definitely* the official seal of Tyre." He looked back up at Kaeso, "Excellent work, *Milite*. I'll be sure the Centurion hears of this and lets the Emperor know. You could very well be looking at a promotion."

Kaeso felt the baby's hand squeeze against his chest through his tunic, "Th-uh, thank you, sir."

"Let us retire to my room and I'll pour you a drink-"

"Actually, sir, I'm really-"

The Decanus smiled knowingly, "I know, I know." He laughed and put an arm around Kaeso's shoulders, "Go ask Ginny for a special, tell her I sent you. You deserve to enjoy yourself for a couple of hours. *This*," he indicated the ring, "is worth it."

Kaeso forced a laugh but in truth he was fairly certain that he going to throw up if he had to stand there much longer. He bowed to the Decanus and walked quickly down the hallway. As he did, he could hear the baby waking up and beginning to whimper. Seeing no one else around, he put a protective arm across his chest and ran as fast as he could through the hallway. He then made the final turn that would lead him to the nursery.

As he rounded the corner, Kaeso came to an abrupt stop at what appeared before him. It was a slew of young women sitting around the hallway in various states of relaxation. Some were reclining on plush settees as others practiced their dancing, while still others sewed tapestry and at least one sat in a corner strumming a harp. Kaeso silently cursed himself as he had forgotten that the nursery was located on the Hidden Women's wing of the palace.

The Hidden Women, or Men, depending on the preferences of who was ruling at the time, belonged exclusively to the Emperor. They were usually taken as infants from handsome couples throughout the empire and raised in the Imperial Nursery. It didn't matter the status of the parents, as long as infant fit the official criteria for beauty, which

also changed upon the whims of the Emperor. New infants were brought in every seven years in order to replenish the fading beauty of the oldest group. None of the Hidden Women ever asked what happened when they reached a certain age. In fact, no one knew what that age was as it, too, changed from ruler to ruler.

The life of the Hidden Women, while appearing opulent and privileged, could also be perilous as any other man outside of the Emperor was forbidden to look upon them and if such an act were discovered, the Hidden women would be killed immediately. The very rare times that the Hidden Women were found outside of their section of the palace, their faces were covered in white lace veils.

Kaeso put a hand up to his head, shielding his eyes just as one of the ladies caught sight of him, shouting angrily, "By the gods, you're not supposed to be here!"

The other women stopped what they were doing and looked up. He heard a few gasp as they covered their faces and fled the hallway.

"No, no, I know, forgive me, ladies," he kept his hand up. "I'm here by special request. Just going to deliver a message to the Nursery and I'll be away. I've seen no one! I swear!"

"I do not like this! We are supposed to have-"

"I apologize!" He ran immediately to the heavy wooden door that was located along the wall beside him and banged loudly on its surface. A panel slid open and he saw a pair of black eyes examining him, "You can't be here."

"Sotiria?"

"Who asks?"

"Agatha sent me."

He heard the sound of a heavy lock shifting and the door opened. He walked in to the all-white marble sitting area. Green plants rested every few feet and comfortable plush lounges, much like the ones outside of the room, lined the walls.

Sotiria, who looked very similar in stature and appearance to Agatha, eyed Kaeso suspiciously, "Well? Where is she?"

He nervously removed his weapons and then took off the *hamata*. As he did, the metal jangle of the chain mail woke the baby and she instantly began to wail at the top of her tiny lungs.

Sotiria's face softened, "Oh, oh, oh, poor dear, come here." She took the red-faced baby out of the binds and cradled her against her overflowing bosom.

"She's-she's probably hungry. I don't think she's had anything to eat since... since we left Agatha's cottage."

"Ah, that's just fine, we'll take care of that, won't we?" she spoke soothingly to the infant, whose wails soon began to fade into whimpers.

Kaeso quickly dressed again and as he did, Sotiria stated, "It was a very kind thing that you have done."

He shook his head, "No, not kind - just the *right* thing. Will she be safe here among the Hidden Women?"

"As safe as I can make her," Sotiria held up a stack of papers from a table beside her. Kaeso could see the official seals in the corners. "I've already drawn up the papers. She is now the child of a lovely farming couple who recently perished in an unfortunate accident."

He smiled slightly, "Now, *that's* very brave."

"It isn't the first time I've done this," she winked at him. "All I need now is to put in a name-"

"Alexia," he spoke up quickly. "Her-her name is Alexia." He gave a sheepish smile to the old woman.

"Alright," Sotiria nodded, "'Alexia' it is."

"I guess I should go, now that she's safe." He walked awkwardly over to Sotiria and smiled down at the baby who stared back at him with wide, gray eyes. "Good luck, Alexia."

Sotiria smiled, "She knows you've done right by her."

He looked up at the woman and laughed slightly as he spoke, "Well, then I mean this in the best possible way, but I hope I *never* set eyes on her again for the rest of my life!"

* * *

Chapter Two

"Sire?"

Tiberius sat against the far wall of the grand *curia* in a large marble-carved seat that overlooked the stately room. Outside, the sounds of a riotous crowd echoed up through the alabaster windows and into the quiet, nearly empty chamber.

"Sire?" Lycania's chief advisor, Lucan, repeated his query a second time to the Emperor but received only a continuing silence as his reply.

The advisor, short balding and overweight with a perpetually guilty-looking pair of eyes that constantly darted around the room, nervously cleared his throat and cast a desperate glance towards Timonus at the Emperor's silence. The Legate, in turn, inhaled sharply but remained hushed in a vain attempt to tamp down the turmoil he felt within himself over their current predicament.

The sound of the crowd outside, made up of the inhabitants of Odalia's poorest area known as the Ala District, suddenly swelled into an overwhelming cacophony of discontentment. The people were demanding answers over the mysterious death of their court representative, Lord Heron, as well as those of his family - for the White Palace had given them none.

Lucan asked for the third time, "Sire? Did you hear what I said?"

Tiberius stared, unblinking, at a spot upon the colorful blue and scarlet mosaic floor before him as he twisted Lady Catherine's ring between his forefinger and thumb. "Yes," he answered, then in an exasperated mocking tone added, "'the people in Feronia are starving.'" He glanced at Lucan, "And if you say 'sire' one more time, I'll have your tongue pulled out from your head and fed to my pigs."

The advisor, slightly flustered by the Emperor's sentiments, continued, "Eh, uh, yes, well, Your Highness, there *has* been evidence of a root blight-

Tiberius shrugged, gesturing to his Legate, "Well, that's very simple then: Timonus, you go to the Eastern Shore, seek out one of the *veneficas* and take her to Feronia to investigate this 'root blight'. It is my suspicion that we've been poisoned by outside forces-

"My liege," Timonus face flushed as he struggled to speak rationally despite the panic that was rising up within, "there is unease in the Empire at the moment," his eyes flickered in the direction of the crowd, "I really can't be-

"Do you think I do not know that?" The Emperor stood abruptly and stalked towards his Second-in-command, "Two weeks Lord Heron's blood has stained my roof, *two weeks!*" He frowned, adding as an aside, "And I've tried everything to get it off."

Tiberius then wandered over to the windows, deep in thought. He examined the pattern within it and began to trace it with the finger of the hand that still held Lady Catherine's ring. He stopped after awhile, then pressed his ear against the alabaster and listened for a moment, "Do you hear them... out there... chanting my name?" He screwed his face up as he spoke sardonically, "They love me, don't they? Even now they cheer for me." He started to laugh, then stopped as his face fell immediately into a scowl, "I don't understand these fools." He rubbed his temples and squeezed his eyes shut tightly, "My head hurts."

"Eh, yes, well, you have to understand, they saw Lord Heron as a kind and *innocent* man," Lucan spoke up.

"Innocent?" Tiberius turned from the window and eyed his advisor. "His whore-daughter of a traitor stood right here before me in this very spot," his fist raised as it closed around her ring, "with a bastard half-Bestial growing in her belly! In *my* court!" He seethed, "How is he *innocent*? He spawned nothing but traitors and law-breakers. Traitors, might I remind you, my good Lucan, who claimed to be from Thera - *a land that doesn't even exist!*" Tiberius eyes glowed with an eerie light.

Lucan spoke carefully, his fingers forming a steeple as he did, "Sire, I mean, Your *Highness*, my apologies, but whether they are right or whether they are wrong, they *are* angry. And, in the last weeks, we have become very nearly prisoners here in the White Palace *because* of that anger. Most of your other advisors and members of court have all returned to their homelands, afraid of the... *atmosphere*... that has currently settled upon Odalia's streets. Even as we speak, the Legate's legionaries have been putting down riots in the Ala District-"

"They are worthless." Tiberius glanced at Timonus as he paced with his hands behind his back, "I wish you'd massacre the whole lot of them. I should've never given him charge over a district in Odalia, the lying scum."

Lucan gently chided, "Yes, well, but they do outnumber us by quite a bit-"

"It matters not - a simple flick of the wrist and they will love me again."

"How, may I ask?" Lucan put forth.

Tiberius smile was unsettling, "We hold a gladiatorial *munus*."

The long-suffering Timonus could no longer hide his agitation, "A *munus*, Your Majesty? Celebrating *what*, precisely?"

His face lit up in eagerness, "Why, Lord Heron, of course!"

The other two men in the room fell into an apprehensive silence as the Emperor continued, gesturing wildly with his hands as he spoke, "We remove the heads from Lord Heron's dead traitor family and set them all on pikes, which we'll then put around the circuit of the Amphitheater."

"To what purpose?" Lucan asked, confused.

"To remind everyone in the Ala District what happens to traitors should they wish to continue in their treacherous ways."

"I doubt very much that will cause them to *love* you, Your Highness."

"Yes, well, forget about love, then!" he snapped. "Besides," he then began to grin slowly, "who wants love when you can have *fear*?" The light in the Emperor's eyes grew stranger.

"Sire," Timonus ignored the voice in his head telling him to stop speaking, "this is madness."

"Oh no, not madness, my dear Legate - just self-preservation. For too long those Bestial pests in the Ala District have leached from Lycania. And, it's true, Lucan, they *do* outnumber us because they continuously breed and multiply like animals but *we* have the power *and* the ammunition to suppress even the most violent uprising."

Timonus stepped forward, shocked by the monarch's words, "Sire, you would murder your own people?"

"Those... *things*... out there are not my 'own people.' Their deaths will not affect the Empire one way or another."

Timonus grew bolder with his anger, "I will *not* be a part of any massacre that-"

"You will do as I command or you will die with them." Tiberius stalked closer to the Legate, "Or is that what you wish? To leave your wife a widow and your sons fatherless?"

Timonus eyes fell to the ground, defeated before he'd even begun to fight, "No, sire, no it is not."

"Good, then. Whatever may happen in the next while, *you* will do as I command and take the *venefica* with you to Feronia. Meanwhile, Lucan, you get with that worthless Vandal at the Amphitheater and arrange the grandest *munus* of all time! Food, wine, *song* - I want it to flow for everyone! We will honor the great Lord Heron and, by the end of the day, they will either praise my name or be too afraid to *speak* it!" He sat back down upon the great

chair and began to roll the ring between his fingers again as an otherworldly smile spread across his face.

Timonus nodded, adding, "Thank you, my liege," before leaving the *curia*. His panic unabated, his thoughts became a race against his feet as he quickly walked the path back to his quarters.

His servant, Jason, met him at the door to his room. The adolescent's eyes were fearful as he asked, "How goes the Empire?"

The Legate forced a smile, not wanting to further alarm the boy, "It goes as it always has. This moment will pass and all will be well. For now, bring me some vellum and pen and ink. I wish to write to my wife."

Jason disappeared as Timonus sat himself down at the small writing desk before the fireplace that heated the cramped quarters. He had never felt so much unease in his life, not even on the battlefield, and he was very unsure of what the future held as the tension rose in the Ala District. The only thing that he *was* sure of was that he wanted his family protected from whatever was brewing over the coming weeks.

Within a few moments, Jason had returned with the aforementioned writing supplies and handed them to his master. Timonus informed the young man that he wanted him to pack quickly as he had an important duty for him to fulfill. Jason, sensing what was going to be asked of him, heaved a gargantuan sigh of relief as he left the room.

Timonus gathered his thoughts, then dipped the copper nib of his pen into the dark ink and began to write upon the yellowed vellum in his elegant script, *"My love, my life - I know not what the current tide of unrest will bring upon Lycania and our family. The Emperor has requested that I ride to Feronia to inspect the root blight that seems to have destroyed a great many of their crops. I know not how long my task will keep me away from hearth and home and, as I will not be around to protect you and the boys, I have asked Jason to escort you three to our homeland of Caninia. Remain there until you see me again but in case you do not and these are my final words, know that I love you, and our children, with all of my heart. Please raise our sons to be strong fighters for Lycania, for I love her and the Mother Wolf almost as much as you. Your husband, M. Timonus Canus"*

He rolled the parchment into a scroll and then sealed it by pressing his family ring into a dollop of melted wax, leaving behind the image of hound. He then handed it to Jason and ordered him to go immediately to his home, which was located within the walls of the city, and escort his family away from Odalia and the White Palace as soon as was possible.

After making sure that the young servant was safely away, a relieved but weary Timonus removed his armor and laid it atop his nearby bed. He stared at the shiny metal sections before him and wondered what his life would have been like had he never donned them all those years ago. He had been so young, in retrospect. So young but so willing to die for the country that he so loved dearly.

Timonus' thoughts drifted to the Emperor, the man and friend that he had served for the last decade, who was growing more and more outlandish in his demands by the day. Timonus wondered briefly if he should continue to serve him, knowing that innocent men, women and children were dying on a nearly daily basis.

But, what choice did he have? He would never be able to dissuade the Emperor, nor would he be left alive if he even dared make an attempt. How would his family survive if he were not there to protect them? Timonus brushed his fingers across the feathers of the helm that marked him as Legate of Lycania. No, he would never abandon his post, not only for the safety of his family, but also for the fear that someone very different from he, someone *without* a conscience, would replace him. He couldn't do that to the country, or the people, that he served.

Clad only in his tunic, Timonus walked over to the hearth to warm his legs, the fire within it burning golden in the small room. He held his hands out to the flames and lifted his eyes towards the prayer statue that rested upon the small mantle above. It was of the Mother Wolf giving succor to the Two Brothers.

Timonus reached up and touched it gingerly, closing his eyes as he did. He had never felt such confusion, such *guilt*, in his lifetime. He felt as if he had been cast adrift into the ocean, alone, with no way to return to the safety and security of the shore.

He slowly knelt before the Mother Wolf and clasped his hands together, something he had not done since he was a child. They began to shake slightly as he prayed, "Dear Mother, who guides her children, what is it that I must do?" His eyes searched the statue's lupine features, "I have served you and my Emperor well... but the things he asks of me now..." Timonus swallowed deeply, "I... I don't know which path to take. If I no longer follow my Emperor, am I not betraying my country *and* Your Grace?" He shook his head, "But what of her people? And the innocents that have already been slain?" He grimaced and fell forward onto his palms while a new wave of shame washed over him as the memories of Lord Heron's lifeless body being removed from the palace under the cover of darkness filled his mind.

His chest began to constrict as he confessed from the deepest parts of his soul, "He was an innocent man." Timonus lowered his forehead to the floor, his lips nearly brushing against the cold tiled floor as he continued to speak, "...an *innocent* man and I let him die... He did nothing wrong and I-I walked away... I *left* him there, even when I knew that death was awaiting him!" He lifted his head and looked up towards the statue, tears and desperation shining in his eyes, "I did *nothing*! I... I was too afraid! Dear Mother, what must I do now to absolve myself of these sins? How do I right these wrongs? How do I get that face, so full of hope for his daughter's return, out of my mind? Please... Dear Lady... answer me in my time of need. *Please*..." He stayed upon his knees for a little while longer, hunched over in benediction, even as the only reply he received was silence.

Timonus was unsure of how long he had knelt there when a knock had come upon his door. He stood quickly and rinsed his hands and face in the nearby washbasin and as he patted them dry with a cloth, he temporarily wiped away any evidence of his previous anguish.

Timonus then opened the door and was surprised to see that it was Lucan standing before him.

"May I enter?" the nervous man asked.

The Legate glowered for a brief moment before relenting, "Yes, come in." He shut the door behind the Advisor.

Lucan's balding gray head shone in the low firelight, "I came here at the behest of several others."

"Yes, and you were probably followed."

The man's normally tiny eyes widened as he looked around the room in terror, "I... I never thought-"

Timonus was short with him, "It doesn't matter now. What do you want?"

"It isn't just me. As I said, I've come at the behest of several others who fear our Emperor is no longer able to rule-"

Timonus shook his head angrily, quickly cutting off anything else that the other man had to say, "How dare you come here! You *know* that I cannot speak against-"

"Yes, yes, I *do* know, which is why I don't want you to speak. I only want you to listen." Lucan steepled his fingers again as he had done earlier in the *curia* when he stood before the Emperor, "As you well know, I have served His Majesty for just as long as you and-and I, *too*, like you, have served his father." He bit his lip nervously, then continued, "But, the Peacebringer, he was very different from Tiberius. The Peacebringer, while

ambitious and self-serving, also knew that it was only by the will of the people that he and his family were allowed to remain on the throne."

Timonus kept silent.

Lucan continued, "So, he knew to keep the people fed, clothed and working. If he did that, the people would leave him to do as he pleased. But, Tiberius," he shook his head, "he *isn't* like his father and though he won't acknowledge it, the will of the people *has* changed. And it isn't just the Ala District, the fervor is spreading throughout all of Odalia and soon *our* very lives are going to be at risk of being caught up in the violence as well!" Lucan wiped his sweating forehead, "I-I know that you cannot say anything, Legate, but I also know that you sense it as I do. As we *all* do!" He met the Legate's eyes, "*Something* must be done!"

Timonus still did not speak.

Lucan persevered, despite being decidedly uncomfortable with the Legate's continued silence, "Look, I am not asking you to do anything at the moment. It's too early and a misstep now would cause our immediate demise by the Emperor's own hand." He shook his head at the thought, "No, no. You do what you must for now, Legate. Go to Feronia with the *venefica* but when you return, Odalia, and thus, Lycania, may be a very different place from the one you know now. If such a thing should occur, those that have sent me wish to know if we would be able to count you among our numbers?"

The Legate's gaze moved towards the statue of the Mother Wolf on the mantle just past Lucan's shoulder. Could he risk his life to betray that which he loved the most? Would he be strong enough? *Should* he?

In answer to the Advisor's question, as well as his own, Timonus, ever so slowly and almost imperceptibly, nodded his head in agreement.

* * *

"1... 2... 3, *again!* 1... 2... 3, *again!*" The gladiatorial *lanista*, Euric the Vandal, paced from one end of the wooden dais to the other, casually eating olives from his hand as he shouted out commands to the less than able recruits. His two trainers, Felix and Castor, weaved throughout their ranks, forcefully correcting any mistakes they saw with their giant leather whips.

Euric shouted indignantly at the recruits in his dark, raspy voice, "Shape up, you pigs, or I swear I'll work you until your legs rot off! 1... 2... 3, *again!* You will learn to *fight* my way or *die* your own! 1... 2... 3, *again!*"

At the end of the dais was Juko, naked and tied to a post with his arms stretched straight up above his head. He had been that way for a little over twenty-four hours as he was being used as an example for the other fighters to show them the consequence of disobedience. His punishment had come quickly and without hesitation after his adamant refusal to take to the training arena when commanded to, despite being told what would happen if he did not.

Euric shouted down to Castor, "Take over for me before I do something to these worthless vermin that I'll regret!" The *lanista* walked over to the exhausted and sore N'bari and quipped, "Do you think that you impress me by not crying out?"

"I... don't *care*... what... impresses you," Juko looked upon the other man with fire in his dark eyes, despite the pain that burned within his shoulders.

Euric nonchalantly tossed another olive into his mouth, "And I don't understand why you refuse to fight. Your brother certainly never did."

"I don't... refuse to fight," Juko answered the Vandal. "I refuse... to fight... for *you*."

Euric seemed unbothered by the N'bari's response and replied simply, "Well, if you don't, you *will* die in the arena. Suna knew this-

"Stop speaking of him!" Juko shouted at the Vandal with the last reserves of his energy.

Euric frowned, "I have told you before that I was genuinely sorry for your loss but I cannot change the rules. If you'd rather die than fight, that's your decision but it won't bring your brother back *nor* will it help you find out what really happened to him."

"You do not... understand. I don't *care* if I die... I cannot return to my father... a failure."

Euric snapped, "It's not your fault your brother is dead!"

"It won't matter... to my father..."

Euric stared at the stubborn young man before him and, despite himself, began to chuckle whilst shaking his head, "I won't be able to break you, will I?"

"You can... *try*..." Juko looked up at him with hooded brown eyes.

Euric leaned in again, whispering, "Listen to me, son, I *know* who killed your brother and if you want to avenge him, dying in the arena will do you no good."

Juko swallowed, though it did nothing to alleviate his dry throat, "You know... who killed him?"

"Yes, and I also know why," Euric stepped back to face the N'bari warrior. "You fight for me and I'll tell you everything." He popped the last olive that was in his hand into his mouth. "What do you say?"

Juko studied the Vandal's broad face and deep-set eyes to see if he was lying. After a few moments, he stated simply, "I think... I do not like you."

Euric laughed a deep, throaty chortle, "Your brother said the same thing when we first met and just as I told him then, I will tell you now: you do not have to like me, just fight for me."

"Do you... really know who killed him?"

The Vandal nodded once, "I am a great many things, my son, but a liar, I am not."

"Then... cut me free."

With a swift and graceful motion, Euric produced a hidden dagger from beneath his robes. He reached around the post and began to slice through the ropes that bound the N'bari's wrists to it. As he did, he moved in closer and whispered, "There are rumors that the woman escaped."

Juko angrily whispered back, "I care not for this... 'woman'."

"Well, your brother seemingly did. *Very* deeply. So deeply, in fact, that he married her - a highly illegal act in this fair city, in case you are unaware."

Juko fell to the ground just as the ropes dropped beside him.

The Vandal bent down and wrapped a firm arm around the young man's ribs to help him stand. As they rose, his voice took on an unexpected tone of concern, "Go and wash in the baths, Juko. Get plenty of water and I will give you a day of rest before you train. You have a long battle ahead of you, my son. A *very* long battle."

Juko was silent as he limped towards the gladiators' bathhouse, which stood just past the practice field in a squat, bricked building that was built atop their quarters. His mind was overwhelmed with all that had happened to him in the last twenty-four hours and he wondered if he should trust such a person as Euric, then very quickly concluded that it did not matter, as he had no longer had any choice.

The *lanista* watched Juko disappear into the bathhouse and thought of Suna, amazed at how different two men from the same family could be. Felix stepped onto the dais beside him and, breaking through his thoughts, announced, "Sir, there is an emissary from the White Palace here to see you."

"Hm, an emissary, you say? Well," he scoffed, "*that's* always good news, isn't it?" He looked past Felix and saw a young man with a parchment roll in his hands speaking to his servant, Posides. He beckoned the messenger towards him.

"My lord-," the young man stepped forward.

"Ah, no, no, no, boy, I am no lord," Euric corrected him, "*lanista* will do just fine."

"*Lanista*, then, the Emperor's advisor, Lucan, requests that you tend to this matter on behalf of the Emperor, *urgently*." He handed the parchment to Euric and, after a bow, dismissed himself from the training area without further prompt.

Euric broke the wax seal of the parchment, the peacock upon it denoting that it had indeed come from Lucan's own hand, and unfurled the paper. As he read the words of the message, his wide face slowly took on a glowing crimson pallor and a snarl began to cross his lips. Euric suddenly balled up the note and threw it to the ground, "Complete madness! How can the Emperor expect such a production in a fortnight? Is he mad?"

"I'm sorry, sir?" Felix asked, surprised by his employer's behavior.

The *lanista* didn't answer right away. Instead, he paced slightly, his hands on his hips as he tried to compose himself and control his anger. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he finally spoke, putting a large-ringed finger in the trainer's face, "Just know that we have our work cut out for us, Felix. How far along are these men? Will they be worth their salt in a fortnight?"

The trainer shook his head, laughing in disbelief at the question, "They're some of the weakest fighters we've ever recruited. I don't know that they'll be ready to fight in six months, let alone two weeks!"

"That was my fear," he nodded. "How many do we have left from our previous batch?"

"Three, sir, not counting Castor and myself."

Euric thought for a moment, pondering his next move, then spoke as he scratched at his chin, "I know what we'll do, then. I want you to personally train that new N'bari recruit. His brother was phenomenal - there *has* to be some of that talent in him as well. We'll parade some hero story around town and turn that boy into a star. It's the only way. We'll bluff the audience - give them an underdog for a hero. They'll be so excited over him and the spectacle we've created that they'll never even notice how short we are on actual talent! Do you understand?"

Felix nodded, even though he didn't, "Yes, sir."

Euric laughed to himself, muttering beneath his breath, "That boy may be getting his revenge a whole lot sooner than he thought."

Further afield, a fatigued and aching Juko was unimpressed with his surroundings. The inner walls of the bathhouse were covered in brightly colored mosaics depicting the past triumphs of some of Odalia's greatest gladiators but, even as he washed in its heated waters, Juko felt it was all too plain and he missed the mountains of his village.

His mind, meanwhile, was fractured and adrift from not only the *lanista's* punishment, nor the still fresh news of his brother's death but also because Juko had never intended to fight in the dust of the arena. In fact, he had never even wanted to step foot in Lycania and it was only out of love for his father and brother and loyalty to his family that he had even ever made the journey to her shores.

Juko's heart ached with renewed grief as he thought of his brother again. He had always looked up to Suna, who had been older by nearly three full years. He was handsome, strong and quick-witted and while Suna had been well loved by all the members of their clan, their father loved him most of all.

Growing up, almost everything that Suna did brought a smile as bright as the rising sun to their father's face. For the Chieftain, his eldest son could do no wrong - not even when, as a mischievous child of eight years old, he had added the oil of the itching plant to the Healer's muscle rub.

But, despite bearing the inability to anger their father, Suna could break his heart like no other. Juko thought back to the night that Suna, who was next in line to be Chieftain of their clan, publicly rejected his birthright during the Inheritance Rite. The act had all but shattered their father, although the rejection had come as no surprise to anyone else in the clan - for Suna had stated time and again that he had never had any desire to lead. He had always been adventurous and restless, with a wanderlust that would never be sated in the Mountains of Selene.

Juko remembered the last time he had seen his brother alive: the day that Suna had left Noba for Lycania. His brother's engaging smile lit up his face even as he said his farewells. "This isn't goodbye, little brother. We'll see each other again! Maybe you'll even join me in Lycania one day?"

"No," Juko shook his head firmly. "I don't have the same desire for danger as you do. My place is here, by father's side, and nowhere else."

Suna's face fell slightly, "I know he is angry with me right now-"

"He's not angry, he's hurt. You've disappointed him, Suna-"

"I know, but... I cannot live my life for him. God forgive me but I have my own path to follow - as do you, little brother."

Juko frowned slightly, "He will never choose me as his heir."

"Then he is a fool. You are a good son; you do what is expected of you. I," he laughed, "I, on the other hand, am a *horrible* son!"

A bell clanged in the distance, signaling the last call for passengers to board the Lycanian trading ship, *Minerva*.

"Goodbye, Juko," Suna hugged his smaller brother tightly, lifting him up off the ground for a brief moment. "Come and see me fight in the arena! I will give you a good show!" Then, with a last wave, Suna turned away and quickly disappeared into the trading vessel that would carry him off to adventures in faraway lands, leaving behind a hurt and angry Juko.

For the next year and a half, Juko tried everything within his power to relieve his father's broken heart but it was of no use. The Chieftain very nearly became a recluse, shutting himself off from his wife, children and the rest of the clan, leaving Juko to act as Chieftain in his stead. But, despite his best efforts, Juko's father steadfastly refused to pass the Birthright to his younger son, holding onto it for the day that Suna would return home.

Back in the bathhouse, Juko stepped from the water. He dried himself off, then picked up a brown training tunic from the pile of clean ones and put it on along with a pair of sandals. He silently cursed his brother, a tear forming in his eye as he laced the training sandals upwards along his calves. He resented his brother's leaving, his father's lack of favor but more than anything he resented that, even from beyond the grave, Suna was forcing him into a fight he did not want - just as he had when they were children.

Juko gritted his teeth and stood. But, he *would* fight because he had given his word and a man was only as good, as *honorable*, as the word he gave. Juko picked up a small practice shield and a wooden *gladius* from the rack that stood next to the door and headed for the gladiator quarters that were now his home.

* * *

Severus hefted the crying infant into the air to the cheers of the villagers of Two-Crows. It had been eight days since the birth of his son but as was customary among the Cavalli he hadn't been allowed to see him until just before that moment, when Nona had

exited the Birthing Lodge. Then, according to tradition, the two of them were given space to themselves to confer on a name while the other villagers gathered around and lit a bonfire.

As the air around them soon filled with celebration over the new birth, more of the villagers joined in the gathering, bringing food and ale from their own pantries in order to prepare a large makeshift feast for Nona and the new baby. Live births were very rare among the Cavalli, so when one occurred, they celebrated that new life with relish.

"Marcus!" Severus shouted above the music and cheers, still holding the infant up for all to see. "This is Marcus, the son of Severus, the Giant-Killer, of the village of Two-Crows! He will one day carry my sword into battle!" A new cheer rose up from the crowd as his wife appeared radiant beside him.

Tacitus, meanwhile, stood just outside of the revelers, in the shadows a little ways away from his own lodge. He watched the others dance and sing before the large fire and around the many tables that were filled to overflowing with hunted game and root vegetables, which lined the area. He smiled wistfully upon the celebration, remembering the exuberance over the birth of his own daughter only a generation before.

"Uncle?" He heard a tiny voice call out to him and looked down to find his five-year-old niece, Aelia, tugging on his breeches. Her red hair was wild and unkempt, for she disliked letting her mother put it into braids, which caused it to form a strange sort of tangled scarlet halo around her cherubic face.

"Aelia, what are you doing over here?" He knelt down beside her. "You should be out there with your mother, celebrating your baby brother's naming!"

"No," she shook her head emphatically.

"Why?"

"I don't want to. I don't like him," her voice took on a surprisingly serious tone for such a young child.

"Who? The baby?"

"Yes," she answered sullenly.

"But, why?"

"Because," her eyes started to shine in the moonlight, "he's a boy. And *I* wanted be a boy! And it's not fair because I'm not one!"

Tacitus laughed, "Oh, Aelia, that's nothing to be sad about-"

"It *is*! Because father will teach *him* to fight with a sword and not *me*! I just *know* it!" She stomped her foot angrily, then started to cry.

"Ohhhh," Tacitus reached out tenderly and held her to his chest. "Now, don't cry, Aelia. That's such a silly thing to cry over!"

"No, it's not."

Tacitus grimaced, unsure of what to say to the small girl to make her feel better, "Have you told your father that you want him to teach you?"

"No," she sniffed as her crying eased slightly, "but I told Mother and she told me girls don't fight with swords! Only boys! I hate the baby! I hate him so much! It's not fair!"

"No, no, no, shhh," he held her again. "Don't say such things, Aelia. Your brother will need you in the future, so you shouldn't say such a horrible thing. And you know what? You shouldn't worry about swords and fighting right now, either. *You* worry about Marcus and your mother and *I'll* talk to your father for you."

"Really?" She sniffed again and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her tunic.

He nodded, "Yes, really. You leave it to me. I'll try to talk to him tonight, even. Now, go and celebrate, Aelia, and be *proud* of your little brother; he is yours for all eternity to protect and love. Do you think you can handle such a big responsibility?"

She grinned a giant grin at her uncle, which revealed a missing front tooth as she nodded.

"Good girl! Now, go to your mother and father, they will miss you soon!"

Aelia gave him another toothless grin and then sprinted back off in the direction of the celebrations.

Across the way, Severus handed his son, still screaming at the top of his lungs, over to Nona, then kissed the top of her head.

"Are you pleased?" she asked, swaddling the infant whose cries began to fade almost immediately in her arms.

"I am, my lady. You have done well, yet again. There aren't many women of the Cavalli that can say they have two healthy living children!"

She laughed, "Yes, and I will do everything in my power to make it stay that way!"

He smiled back, warmly, "I know you will, my lady, I know you will."

They looked at each other for only a moment, sad smiles touching their lips while hours of conversation passed between the two of them even as no words were spoken.

Nona laughed again to break their silence, "Alright, my husband, now go and get yourself some ale! It is a celebration after all!"

He nodded, "Yes, it is, my lady! And tonight I will drink my fill!"

Severus left his wife's side and made his way towards one of the many tables that now surrounded them. He grabbed a wooden mug full of ale and took a giant swig. As he did he caught the figure of Tacitus above the rim, watching the festivities from the shadows. He drained the cup quickly, then crossed the village center to greet his brother.

"Hullo, Tacitus, you *can* join us, you know?"

He nodded politely, "I know."

Severus gave his brother a hardy slap on the back, "My son, he's big, huh?"

"Yes, he is. You should be very proud. He'll make a fine swordsman one day, my brother."

"By the *gods*, I hope so!"

"Father would be pleased."

He nodded solemnly, "I hope he would. I never thought I would have a son, or any child for that matter, and I was afraid that the Order would never rise again. Now, though, Tacitus, now it *will* live again! I just hope I can find the recruits I need."

Tacitus paused a moment, gathering his courage to say what needed to be said, "Uh, Severus, I - um, I - what about Aelia?"

"What about her?" Severus gave his brother an odd look.

"I mean, I know it's not my place but, I... I think Aelia would make a fine swordsm-er, ah, woman. You've practically taught her since birth to wield that little wooden dagger of hers."

"A swords wo -Aelia? Really?" he looked surprised. "I've... never thought about it before but, by the gods, I think you're right, Tacitus!" He laughed, "All this time I've been worried that the Order would have no members until my son came of age - and I have had its first recruit under my roof the whole time! How could I be so blind?"

"She definitely has your determination!" Tacitus laughed.

Severus nodded, "Very true! And her mother's temper!"

Tacitus face fell slightly at the mention of Nona but he covered it with a smile, "Yes, well, I-I think it's a brilliant idea! Although..."

"Although, what?"

"Well, the idea may not be well received among our brothers and sisters of Two-Crows."

Severus scoffed, "Ah, well, when has anything *we've* ever done been well received among these people?"

"Yes," Tacitus nodded, "that is very true."

"Well, I should probably get back but, Tacitus," he looked at his younger brother, "just know that you are welcome to join us. You are *always* welcome and forever will be."

He gave Tacitus one last hardy pat before returning to join his family in the festivities. As he turned away, Tacitus could see the scars that were upon Severus' back peeking out from beneath his shirt and snaking up the sides of his neck.

Tacitus' eyes fell to the ground as he was suddenly awash in a flood of remorse at the sight of them. It had been years since his brother had been forced to carry his shame but the rawness of the debt was always there, just under the surface and no amount of sacrifice on his part would ever be enough to repay his brother.

Tacitus turned away from the celebration and walked towards his home and the one thing in the world that would never judge him: his pony, Bellona. He greeted her as he began to brush her coat, "Ah, Bellona, at least I can do right by you, huh, girl?" He spoke aloud to her as he continued to brush, "And then, one day, I will show them all that I *am* worthy again. Well," he laughed slightly, "at least as soon as I start to believe it myself."

* * *

As the misty morning dawned, Timonus was pleased that he had at last arrived at the caves of the Eastern Shore. He had already ridden for a majority of two hours since before the sun rose and the path that had led him there had not been an easy one. His back and shoulders ached and the last few meters of the way had been littered with sharp rocks and boulders, causing his horse and the one that he had brought for the *venefica*, to lose its footing more than a few times and nearly throw him down onto the craggy terrain.

As he rode up to the dark gaping maw of the largest cave in the area, five *veneficas* stepped out to welcome him. They stood before Timonus, all in a straight line as if the same woman had been used over and over in order to make four additional duplicates of the original, each dressed in black, long-sleeved gowns. Their long hair, dark as the caves that surrounded them, was pulled upwards and set atop their heads in intricate braids, contrasting with their pale, almost bluish skin, while each of their lips and fingertips were stained the same color of pitch as their dresses.

Timonus, uncomfortable in their presence, adjusted himself uneasily atop his horse's saddle and announced, "I am here for Moriana."

"*We* are Moriana," they answered in unison, the same slight smile upon all of their faces.

Timonus expression grew annoyed as he spat out, "Fine, you can *all* be Moriana if you wish but *one* of you must ride with me to Feronia."

The *venefica* that stood in the middle of the line stepped forward, the slight grating smile still upon her black lips, "I will ride with you, Legate." She turned around to face the others and bowed slightly, "Goodbye, my Sisters. May the Goddess protect you."

"And you!" they called out again in disturbing unison as she climbed atop the other horse that Timonus had brought along.

Once he was sure that she was safely seated in the sidesaddle, they began their trek upwards through the rocks towards the path that would carry them away from the caves of the Eastern Shore and along the cliffs all the way to Feronia.

"I saw you in my dreams last night," Moriana spoke to Timonus from her place behind him, her tone as overcast as the gray sky above them.

He sighed, already aggravated by her mere presence, "Oh, and was I in a great battle? Or-or winning some kind of war? Isn't that the way it always is with you... *sorceresses*?" He spat out the last word.

"No," her half-smile stayed put on her face as she pulled her horse up equal to his, "you were dead." She then kicked her horse and sped a little ways ahead, leaving Timonus' mouth agape as he watched after her.

"Wait!" He shouted as he caught up with her. "What do you mean 'dead'?"

"Ah, but you are an unbeliever. Tell me, why should I indulge you in revealing the innermost visions of the Wayward Daughter?"

He seemed flustered, "Yes, I-I *am* an unbeliever where you lot are concerned, it's true, but being told that you were dead in a stranger's dream is very unsettling, no matter what path your beliefs may take."

Her eyes took on a bemused look, though her expression never changed, "Then again, maybe it wasn't you, after all."

"Fine," Timonus grew agitated. "I should've known it was a *venefica* trick. You are trying to poison my mind; it won't work."

"You're angry with me?"

He didn't respond.

Realizing she wouldn't get very far playing mind games with the Legate, she instead asked, "How long is our ride?"

"Two days. Feronia is along the shore, to the North. We'll ride all day and camp tonight and then a full ride tomorrow and we should be there."

"I fear it won't be as easy as you say." Moriana looked towards the sea, "There are dark things brewing in the Empire."

He nodded, "You don't have to be a sorceress to know that."

She looked at him, her wry smile seemingly less frozen, "But it helps."

They rode the next hour in silence, the horse's hooves falling against the path and the waves crashing beneath the cliffs making the only sounds that brushed against their ears.

After awhile, exhausted by the company of his own thoughts, Timonus asked, "Did you really see me dead?"

Moriana smiled sadly, "Well, I... I saw a legate... he was laying facedown on a battlefield. There was... smoke... all around and the cries of death," her face showed its first true sign of emotion as her mouth turned slightly downward and a quiet fear entered her eyes, "you are the Legate, correct?"

"I am."

"Then, yes, it was you."

They continued their silence for a few more meters, the roll of distant thunder murmuring in the distance.

Again growing tired of the lull in their conversation, Timonus cleared his throat and began to speak, "Well, despite your supposed vision, I still don't believe-"

"You know, I was like you, once: an unbeliever," she interrupted.

Timonus looked at Moriana in surprise.

She laughed, "What? You think I was born *venefica*?"

"Aren't they usually?"

She shook her head, "No, that's only a rumor. We don't actually nurse on poisoned milk as infants."

"So, how did you-"

"Become one? Well, I," she smiled wistfully down at her hands, which held the horse's reins, "it's a very long and uninteresting story."

Timonus laughed slightly, "We have a two-day ride. It can be as long and uninteresting as you want and it will still pass the time."

"I... suppose," the frozen, hesitant smile returned.

"Well, let's start with your name, then. What is your *real* name?"

She shook her head, "No, Moriana is my name now. That *is* my real name."

"I don't see how we'll get very far into the story if you insist on-"

"*Moriana* will do for now," she declared with a resolute finality in her statement.

Timonus frowned slightly, "Alright."

They rode a bit longer before she spoke again, "I... I was an orphan in Odalia."

"You're from the capital?"

She laughed freely, "Well, who knows where I'm *actually* from but," she shrugged slightly, "that's where I was found at least. I... don't remember how I arrived in the city or even how old I was. I just know that from the time that I was about eight years of age, I dug through refuse piles and stole what I could to survive. I slept in the alleyways-"

"That's very dangerous for a girl so young."

"I had a knife," she said matter-of-factly. "I fell in with another group of street children and an older boy took pity on me and gave it to me." She smiled at the memory, "He taught me to use it. Thankfully, I only had to use it once." Her expression hardened with the last part of her statement.

Timonus wasn't sure what to say next, so offered, "My men tell me of the street children. They say they give them food whenever they can."

She smiled broadly, "That's true. The soldiers of the city were always good to us."

"So how - *when* did you get off of the streets?"

Moriana's face fell a bit, "Not for a long, long time."

"How did you survive?"

She looked over at him, "There aren't a lot of options for adolescents on the street, male *or* female. I did what I had to; I'm a survivor."

Timonus felt uncomfortable at her revelation.

Moriana laughed as she sensed his discomfort, "Too bad I wasn't lucky enough to work in one of the Empire's brothels but, then again, if I had, maybe Mother Marcella would've never found me."

"Mother Marcella?"

"She was the high-priestess of the *veneficas* back then. She found me one night, wandering the streets." Moriana became lost in the memory, her eyebrows knitting together, "I was maybe around fourteen years, or maybe a full decade and a half, I can't remember but I *was* half-starved... half-naked... covered in flea bites..."

Timonus cleared his throat, "That's-"

"And one night, there she was; the most beautiful figure I had ever seen," her face relaxed into a bright smile. "She stood at the end of the alleyway and offered me her hand. It was... *clean*... and she smelled like-like... something *sweet*, something *amazing*! She told me

she could save me if I'd only pledge my life to Vypera and the Wayward Daughters, the *veneficas*. I took her up on her offer right then and there."

He nodded, "So, you have been a *venefica* since that night?"

"Yes. I trained everyday, building up my resistance to the most deadly of poisons. There were several missteps along the way, though."

Timonus looked at her, curious, "Missteps?"

"Yes," she laughed. "I did not develop a resistance to a particular poison in the way that my sisters had and nearly lost my life to it after being gravely ill for two weeks. I was sure I was going to die, as were my sisters. They'd actually already begun my final rites and the preparation for my funeral."

"What poison was it?"

"It is called Realger and is found in the red rocks beneath the ground. I'm afraid I'm still very much susceptible to it even now." She looked at him, "Venom, though, that's something else entirely. I have conquered all of the venoms of the known world."

He looked at her cautiously, "I've been told that the *venefica* sleep with snakes."

She laughed loudly, her black-stained mouth opened wide, "No, not at all! I mean, we do have a *domus serpens* where we keep several snakes and I cannot deny that we *respect* Aspis, for she is our patron goddess and Vypera's handmaiden, but it's because of that respect that I would never have one in my bed!"

Timonus smiled, then confessed, "I'm sorry that I seem so skeptical. I would have you know that I worship the Great Mother Wolf and, on that path, there is very little room for her Wayward Daughter."

Moriana nodded, "It's true. The Mother Wolf did cast the Two Brother's Sister, Vypera, aside upon discovering her darker side but..." she trailed off, unsure of how to continue.

"Yes?" Timonus urged her.

She laughed, somewhat self-consciously as she continued, "Well, I would say that darkness doesn't necessarily mean malevolence."

"How so?" he looked upon her doubtfully.

"Well, take the night goddess for instance: is she evil just because she appears when the sun god is gone?"

"I... suppose not."

"Darkness is simply the opposite of light, not its enemy."

A new silence fell between them as they rode further down the path. Timonus looked towards the sky and gave up any hope of the gray skies clearing as a cold mist began to pelt his face. He stared ahead at their path as he asked, "Does it bother you that I follow the Great Mother?"

"No," Moriana shook her head, "the Mother Wolf's Daughter will always love and respect her. She is the Mother of All Things."

Satisfied with her answer, Timonus began to feel a bit less suspicious of the strange young woman. He still didn't completely trust her, nor her supposed magic, but at least he could look upon her as a human with rational thought and not a brainwashed child of the occult.

They rode another few meters before the path began to ascend upwards in a slight slope, the shore falling away further and further below them. As they crested the top of the small hill, Timonus noticed that the *venefica's* dress was becoming sodden by the mist the longer they rode. In a moment of compassion, he spoke, "We may need to make camp sooner rather than later if this weather keeps up."

"But, it would be best if we rode straight through-"

"You may be full of darkness but even *you* cannot overcome the wet and cold."

She frowned, "I will be fine-"

"You're shivering."

Moriana paused a moment, then spoke slowly, "...and you're very observant."

"I'm afraid it comes with my position."

She looked at him, her black hair beginning to stick to her forehead, "Then, why aren't you fighting with the rest of the forces in the Bestial lands?"

Timonus face instantly hardened, "Because the Emperor needs me at home."

Thunder roared overhead, closer than it was before, and Moriana blanched at its loudness.

He was beginning to feel a bit nervous himself, "I-I think we may need to make camp-"

"No, we can't! We've only ridden for a few hours, it seems such a-"

Lightening flashed over the sea.

He looked pointedly at her, "Does *that* convince you?"

Moriana's pale face seemed even paler as she nodded vigorously, "Yes. There are some caves up ahead if we can ride for at least another hour."

"I suppose we've no other real choice. I hadn't really prepared for thunderstorms."

She stopped her horse for a moment and looked out over the sea again, "It is the Mother's Daughter. She is unhappy."

Timonus stared into the distance alongside her, "Or the Mother Herself is. Now, what direction are the caves in?"

"Just up the path and then...," a strange look crossed her face.

He looked at her, "What?"

"Hold on. Something's not right."

"What do you mean?"

"That *sound*? Do you hear it?" They stared at each other as the sound of the distant rolling thunder grew louder.

Timonus eyes widened slightly, "That's not thunder... those are horse's hooves! But there are no patrols out here -"

She kicked at her horse and pulled it towards the rocks on the left, "Follow me, Legate! We need to get out of here! Now!"

"Why? What is it?"

"The *Gigantes*."

"Giants? But they don't come this far north!"

"They do now. We've seen them near the caves but we've no time for discussion. You'll have to trust me. Come on, Legate, if you want to live!"

He followed her into the rocky outcropping that lined their path along the left side. The horses hesitated at having to be forced again over the rough terrain but eventually did as they were led.

"Get down, *now*!" she shouted at him as she flung herself from her horse into the rocks.

Timonus attempted to do the same but only managed a clumsy facsimile as he stumbled from his horse to the ground, eventually crawling beside her to hide behind a large nearby boulder.

"The horses!" he whispered to her in alarm.

"They will have to find their own way. If we are seen by the *Gigantes*, it will mean instant death."

"I have lost men to them before. The stories I have hear -"

"Shh, Legate! They're coming closer!"

Moriana hesitantly peered around the edge of the big stone and saw a group of nearly a hundred men and horses come to a stop on the path before them. The men, or

arguably *beasts*, that sat atop the horses appeared slightly larger than an average man of Lycania - but it was their oversized armor and headdresses, which made them appear larger than had given them their legendary moniker. The horses that they rode upon were also large, clad in similarly imposing armor from the top of their equine heads to the bottom of their hooves, where hair flowed on their legs in the same way as it did from their mane and tails; taking a quick peek himself, Timonus had never before seen horses that looked as they did.

In the middle of the *Gigantes* horde was a wooden cart being pulled by one of the enormous horses. Atop the cart was a cage where half-naked male and female Bestials wept and clung to each other in fear. One of the horde's riders hit the cage with a blunt side of his weapon, which caused the people inside to scream and scramble to the opposite end where another rider on the other side hit at them as well, growling and bearing his rotted teeth as he did.

One of the *Gigantes*, the largest of them all, grunted and waved an arm to silence the others. On the very top of the Giant's head sat a ram's skull, while beneath the macabre headdress his face was painted black with the ram's rotten blood and on his shoulders he wore pauldrons made of sharpened bone spikes. His mid-section appeared to be protected by a collection of mismatched metal armor pieces, probably retrieved from his previous victims; the rest of his body was as large as the oxen that were used to plow the fields of Lycania. He slid from his horse and the Legate was surprised that the ground itself did not shake when he landed. Timonus believed him to be the leader of the group from how the others reacted to him.

The *Gigantes* lifted his pig-like nose in the air and sniffed. Suddenly a yellow-toothed smile crossed his blackened face and he barked out orders to the others in a kind of gruff, monosyllabic language that neither Timonus nor Moriana recognized. The rest of the *Gigantes*, all in variations of the same type of spiked bone armor and animal skulls, slid from their horses as well and began to scour the surrounding area.

Moriana turned her back to the stone and pulled her knees in tight. Timonus followed her movements and whispered a quick mental prayer to the Mother Wolf. He was frightened but didn't want to show the *venefica* his fear lest he put her into a further panic. The *Gigantes* leader barked more orders, his voice getting louder in their ears as he grew closer. Timonus breath came quicker even as he tried to mask it.

Suddenly a shadow fell over the two cowering behind the stone. Timonus chanced a glimpse upward and saw the back of the *Gigantes* leader standing just a hair's breadth away

from them, the ram horns on either side of his head spiraling up towards the heavens. One sound, one move and they would be found out.

Timonus' mind raced with memories of stories that his men had often brought back from their patrols, telling rumors of the *Gigantes'* mythical feasts, which were said to be made up of a variety of human dishes. No one knew for sure if the *Gigantes* themselves were human or not because, as far as he was concerned, no one in the known world had ever survived an encounter with a Giant. Timonus swallowed deeply, regretting his actions immediately for he was afraid their pursuers could hear even the slightest sound.

The leader standing over them snorted like a wild beast, as if he could smell their very bones. Timonus saw him begin to turn and the Legate squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for what would happen next. He took a deep breath but, as he did, one of the *Gigantes* called out to its leader from across the way. The monstrosity overhead answered in his gruff feral-sounding voice and walked away towards his companion.

They had discovered the horses and immediately set upon them, devouring them in less than three minutes. After they were finished, the *Gigantes* returned to their own mounts and the leader lifted his arm in the air, howling as they continued down the path on to wherever their destination might have been.

When the last of their dust was well and truly in the distance, Moriana sprung from her spot and sang to the heavens, "Thank you Great Goddess! You who protect Her Children!" She laughed loudly then glanced down at Timonus as she offered him a hand, "You are white as the owls that fly around the caves at night, Legate."

"I... it's been a long time since I've been... in such a situation." He tried to slow his racing heart as he stood, "Why would the Giants ever come this far north?"

"I don't know," Moriana answered as she looked into the direction where they had ridden off. "Maybe they sense the darkness that is brewing throughout Lycania. I hope my sisters will be safe."

"But, the Giants, they aren't citizens of *any* country. They're thieves and murders and possibly not even human; what does it matter to them how the Empire goes?"

"*Spolia opimia*, Legate; the spoils of war. You should know that better than I." She looked around, "Well, we are now minus our horses. Luckily, those worthless brutes were too stupid to figure out that two riderless horses could possibly mean that the riders were nearby."

Timonus nodded, "Thank the Great Mother."

She looked at him, smiling slightly, "And Her Daughter."

"At this point, I'll thank whoever it was that saved us." He took a deep breath, "I suppose we should wait out the night, then return to Odalia."

"No," she shook her head firmly, "we should go on to Feronia."

"But, all of our supplies are gone."

A genuine smile crossed Moriana's blackened lips, "Yes, but I am not without my own resources, Legate."

As Timonus heart began to settle into a more natural rhythm within his chest, he realized arguing with the young woman would be pointless. Plus, there was a side of him that had enjoyed their brief brush with death. It had been a long time since he had felt such excitement and, for once, he was actually glad to be in the presence of the *venefica*. "Alright, on to Feronia we go, then."

* * *

Chapter Three

Morning dawned upon Two-Crows and Tacitus began it the same way he had begun every day for the past few weeks, by feeding and watering Bellona behind his house. He talked at length to the horse as he did, all about the mysteries of life, art and medicine and he soon discovered that their morning one-way chats were becoming quite an enjoyable habit for him. Tacitus had rarely been able to speak so freely without opposition - though, at times, he could swear it seemed as if the horse were answering him.

"Well, girl," he brushed her coat as the sun rose up over the treetops of the Aulus Forest, "I'm thinking it's almost time for us to head out into the desert. I've heard of a new species of Betony that might be growing there. I think it'll be good for Cinna's headaches. What do you think, girl?"

The horse glanced back at him and gave him a low nicker.

He laughed, "Yes, alright, maybe we're not ready just *yet*, but someday soon." Tacitus studied the fibers of Bellona's coat as he swept across it, making sure that they all lay in the same direction as the brush glided over her haunches. He had become so focused on this task that he never saw the determined figure of Nona furiously stalking towards him until it was too late. As she reached his side undetected, she pulled her arm back and launched a slap across his face.

He stared at her, his mouth open in shock as he gently touched the reddening cheek in disbelief, "...Nona?"

"How dare you?" she shouted at him angrily.

"Wait, what-"

"How *dare* you?" she repeated, her own face betraying a deep hurt that had just moments earlier rendered her maternal soul into pieces. "What gave you the right?"

"What are you talking about?"

Nona reached back to strike him again but he caught her wrist. She wrenched her arm free and shouted at him, "You gave him my daughter, you *bastard!*"

Tacitus' eyes closed as his body sagged with realization, "By the gods above, you mean Aelia."

"*Yes!*" Her anger was quickly giving way to tears, "How dare you, Tacitus? She isn't yours to give, she's *mine!*" She pointed at her own breast, "I *knew* I would lose my son. Every mother *knows* that when they lay him in your arms but... my *daughter?*" The tears spilled unashamedly over her cheeks, forming salty rivulets that ran down her chin.

Tacitus reached out to the woman whom he had quietly loved more than life itself for the past six years and folded her to his chest. "I'm so sorry, Nona," he spoke soothingly to her as she wept against him. "But Aelia needs to be in the Order. She *belongs* there."

"No!" She pulled back slightly and looked up at him but he found her eyes no longer angry. Instead, they now pleaded with him, "She belongs with *me*! If she joins the Order, her life will be over! She... she'll be an outcast! She-she won't even be able to *marry*!"

Despite her protestations, Tacitus couldn't help but smile at her words as he spoke to her gently, "Nona, think about what you are saying. It doesn't even sound like you! Can you imagine Aelia being married off the way you were? Would you even *want* her to be?"

The red-haired woman stayed quiet for a few moments, lowering her green eyes to the floor until finally uttering a whispered, "...no."

He lifted her chin and wiped the tears from her face with his thumbs, "No, of *course* not. What is it that you used to tell me? '*Marriage is no place for a woman!*'" A small smile returned to her face and he chuckled at the sight of it, "Ah, Nona, I still remember the day your father brought you into the village, kicking and screaming and as beautiful and terrible as a thunderstorm brewing on the horizon."

Nona's smile grew brighter, "Yes, that horrible, *wonderful* day... the day that I met you."

Her eyes misted over as the memory returned. She had arrived in the village in a truly horrible state after being half-dragged behind her father's horse during the entire five-mile trek from their home of Big Oaks to Two-Crows, her hands tied together by a rope that he had held from his place upon the saddle. To her credit, though, Nona had spent the entire trip shouting curses at him.

As they entered the village, her father called for the Elders and a crowd began to form. They looked upon the bedraggled woman with curiosity, her red hair spilling wildly around her face with a mixture of twigs and leaves lost within it and her simple dress torn at the shoulders and along the bottom hem.

Seneca, his back bent over with his ever-increasing age and having to use a sturdy stick to walk with, emerged from the crowd. He called up to Nona's father, "What is this thing that you do here?" his ancient voice was hard to hear in the surrounding wood.

"I am Scaeva of Big Oaks and this is my daughter, Nona, who was pledged to be married to your Pavo, the tanner."

Seneca bowed his white head, "Yes, I am sorry for the loss of your once future son-in-law. He fought bravely against the boar and his death was honorable-"

"Nevertheless, his death has still stuck me with *this* one," he tugged at the rope to indicate Nona, who stared at Seneca with eyes full of fire as she stumbled from her father's actions. "She is in her third decade and I can no longer support her under my roof."

"But, Pavo paid his dowry for her. I know, because I blessed it myself."

"Aye, he did, so that means she is *yours* now. You feed her and you deal with her." He threw the rope at Seneca's feet, "But I advise you to keep her tied up until you find someone strong enough to handle her; she bites *and* kicks." Scaeva gave his daughter one last glare then turned his horse around and started back out of the village.

"You good for nothing bastard of a father!" she screamed out after him. "May the gods curse the day you were born and give you a slow, painful death because Heaven knows I will if given the chance!" Nona then let out a frustrated cry as she stomped the ground.

Seneca stared awkwardly at the new member of his village, unsure of what to do next.

Nona growled at him, "What are *you* looking at, old man? Untie me now and let me after that bastard!"

"Hmm...no, my dear," the old man replied calmly. "I fear he is correct in that although you did not *marry* Pavo, the tanner *did* pay for you." Nona seethed harder but Seneca continued speaking anyway, "You now belong to the village of Two-Crows."

"Fine, if that is so then untie me and I will go peacefully to my new home."

"But, I have no place for you to go. Pavo's former possessions now belong to his family and you are still an unmarried woman."

Nona rolled her eyes, "I don't see how that-"

"We have rules in this society for a reason, young lady. You are an unmarried woman and thus unwelcome to stay overnight in anyone's house except your parent's."

"Yes, well, we've all seen how well *that's* worked out."

Seneca grunted as he reached down and unsteadily picked up the rope that still lay beside his feet and gave it an ineffectual tug. "Come. You stay by this tree."

Nona's face contorted in disbelief as she looked at the Elder, then at the faces of the muted crowd that now surrounded her, "Are you serious?"

Seneca spoke to the villagers, "This woman will stay here until someone steps forward to claim her in marriage. If you wish to marry her, seek my counsel. I will be in my home till then." He gave her one last look, a nod, and then hobbled off into the direction of his house. Soon after his departure, the rest of the crowd, sensing no further excitement was forthcoming, began to disperse as well.

Nona, still in a state of disbelief, shouted at them, "What is *wrong* with all of you? You would rather let me die in the elements than let me into your homes? I hope the gods curse you all!"

Tacitus, meanwhile, had watched the entire event from his usual position just on the outskirts of the crowd. When he was sure they had all gone from the area, he cautiously approached the woman, who now sat, defeated, before the trunk of a large tree.

When she heard him approach, she sat up and hissed at him, "Get back! I'll gut you if you come near me!"

Tacitus froze, "I'm sorry, I-I just want to untie you. You look very uncomfortable." He knelt down before her, "I am Tacitus, the *medicus* of the village."

She eyed him suspiciously, "I'm Nona, of the village of Bi-" she sighed mid-sentence and looked away from him, "well, I suppose I'm just Nona, now."

"I'm sorry for what has happened," he gently took her hands and pulled them closer to him. He then pulled a small knife from his boot and cut away the ropes. As they fell away, he saw that her wrists were red and raw and his face filled with a slight worry, "You must put something on that soon or it will fester."

"It-it will be fine. *I* will be fine," she pulled her hands away from him. "Thank you for your concern."

"Are you hungry?"

Nona hadn't eaten anything since long before her journey had begun that morning. "No," she lied, "but again, thank you."

"I will bring you something later." He reached out and held her chin as he examined her face, "You seem healthy. So, how is it that you have reached three decades without being claimed by someone?"

She laughed, "Because I am smart. Or maybe the men are, I don't know." Nona tucked a piece of leaf-strewn hair behind an ear, "I only relented to marry Pavo because my father had threatened to throw me out to the forest goblins. I know he's a bastard on his best day but I never thought he'd go *this* far!" She shook her head as her expression saddened, "You cannot know what it feels like to be rejected by your entire village, by your family..."

Tacitus felt a burning along the scar on his chest, "No... I guess I cannot. I hope someone comes forward quickly on your behalf."

"Me, too. I don't really want to sleep outside, in the darkness." She looked at Tacitus, her eyes touched by fear, "What if no one comes forward? What will happen to me then?"

"I... don't know. I have been a Cavalli for all of my four and half decades and yet sometimes even I still don't understand our ways."

"You look much younger. What is that scar on your cheek from?"

Tacitus hand went up automatically to the right side of his face, where he had inked a large swirl in the hopes that it would cover the old scar given by Otho. "Uh..."

"I'm sorry, Tacitus," Nona smiled, slightly embarrassed. "I tend to be very forward at times and forget myself."

He smiled softly in return, "I admire that quality, actually. I'm quite the opposite. I tend not to say much."

She laughed, and it was a pleasant sound that fell easily upon his ears, "Ah, now *that* I envy! Perhaps if I had been more like you I would be married by now!"

Tacitus bowed his head and blushed slightly, "Well, I'm glad you are not." He looked back up at her in surprise, "I mean, I-"

They both fell into a fit of shared laughter despite themselves and their current situation.

Tacitus then shook his head, "I can't leave you here like this. You will come home with me." He looked at her, "Well, I-I mean, if that's what you want."

"Yes, but," she leaned in closer to him and whispered, a mischievous smirk upon her lips, "won't they talk?"

His expression hardened slightly, "That is not something I've ever been concerned with. I learned a long time ago that you cannot change what people think of you once they've decided what you are."

"You know, I think I like you, Tacitus. I think we're going to be great allies," she winked at him.

He blushed again, becoming flustered, "Well, I, uhm, thank you, Nona. Shall-shall we return to my home?" He held out his arm and, smiling, she took it.

They stood and both walked, heads held high, across the village to Tacitus' home. No one said a word as they passed, but the whispers behind their backs were easily carried to their ears by the wind. Nona tried to suppress her smile as they continued to walk but, unable to, she started to giggle devilishly, "I have been a scandal all my life: the red-haired demon baby delivered by witches."

He looked at her wryly, "They really said that about you?"

"Yes," she answered matter-of-factly, "everyone in my village, all the days of my life."

They came to a stop outside of Tacitus' home. Nona was fascinated by the artwork along its edges and reached up to trace some of the symbols carved in the wood, "I actually recognize a few of these."

He was pleasantly surprised, "You do?"

She nodded, "I was taught to read by the village Grandmother. She was one of the few people that ever showed me kindness there. I enjoy reading but we don't, uh, *didn't*, have a lot of books, though."

"Well," the corner of his mouth began to lift as they entered the abode, "I might can accommodate you in that regard."

After she was given a chance to freshen up as best she could, they sat at the small table before the hearth and talked long into the night over a dinner of venison stew, bread and Two-Crows ale.

Nona yawned as the frogs began to sing their nighttime songs outside, leaning her head upon her hand as she looked over at Tacitus who was in the middle of a diatribe about the healing properties of Willow Bark. She interrupted him, "Why don't I just marry *you*?"

Tacitus, taken aback, stopped speaking, his jaw hanging open.

"I mean, we're compatible and we clearly enjoy each other's company," she continued. "So, why not?"

"I... because... you can't."

"Why?" she asked, annoyed by his answer.

"Well, I'm... I'm a widower. My-my wife died a few years ago-"

"And the Ways state that even in death you are still married," she sighed, defeated again. "Well, then I suppose there is nothing left for me to do but to walk into the desert and die or meet my fate with the forest goblins."

"No, Nona, there-"

"It's no use, Tacitus. There is nothing for me now-"

"No!" He growled. "You don't strike me as the type to just lie down and-and...*wait!* I have an idea!"

She sat up in her seat, "You do?"

"My brother!" He looked at her as a triumphant smile crossed his face. "Yes! It's perfect! He is the Protector of the Village but has never married!"

"Why?" she made a face.

Tacitus shrugged, "I-I suppose he's never had the time to find a wife. It's never really been that important for him, I guess."

"But, is he... *pleasant*... like you? I've enjoyed our conversations very much this evening. No man has ever spoken to me as you have."

He turned away from her and stared into the fire burning away in the hearth, "Severus and I are nothing alike... but," he glanced back at her, "he is a good man, an *honorable* man. You will be safe and protected and-and you won't be homeless! You'll be well fed and he has a lot of respe-"

"Tacitus," she placed her fingers against his lips, "it's alright. I believe you."

He smiled, slightly embarrassed, "I-I will go speak to him now. He is probably on night watch anyway."

"Thank you, Tacitus," another yawn escaped her lips. "Meanwhile, I think I will just sleep here for the night."

He nodded and then retrieved a large fur for her, moving the table to the side and placing the fur on the ground before the fire. "This will keep you warm and I will return in the morning."

"Thank you again, Tacitus. I will make it up to you one day, I swear." Still clothed in her torn dress, with twigs and dirt in her hair, she lay down upon the thick pelt and closed her eyes. Tacitus cast a last look upon her as she curled up before the fire. She was beautiful and every time she had spoken to him that night, it had made his heart soar like no other.

But he was being a fool, he told himself as he walked across the village in the dark to his brother's house. No one could love another in the space of a few hours. No, what he felt was intrigue at the newness of her being there, nothing more. He then pushed aside his burgeoning feelings as he looked for his brother.

The next morning, Severus, Tacitus and Nona had gathered around the tree in the center of the village. Nona knelt beside Severus as he called Seneca out. The crowd soon gathered a second time and Seneca asked, "Do you, Protector, claim this woman?"

Severus looked down at her, his face as stern as always and held out a hand. Nona took it and rose. "Yes, I claim her as my own, Elder. We will be married by sundown and her household shall join my household."

"Then it is official!" Seneca held up his arms as best he could and announced to the village, "Let it be known that Severus of Two-Crows, the Protector of the Village, has now claimed Nona, formally of the village of Big Oak, for his own. Welcome to our village, my child." He lowered his hands as the crowd applauded and hurraed.

Nona seethed at their hypocrisy and Tacitus looked upon the pair with both joy and sadness etched across his face, while Severus' face remained a blank slate.

"No," Nona spoke as the memory faded, "I do *not* want that for Aelia." Her eyes, still slightly wet with tears, looked upon him, a profound mixture of emotions smoldering behind their green surfaces. "But she is the only thing that I am allowed to love in this world, freely and without consequence. He will take her from my side... just as you were taken." She grabbed him tightly in a desperate embrace as Tacitus bowed and kissed the top of her head. His voice cracked slightly as he spoke to her softly, "I'm... I'm sorry, Nona. For *everything*. I will always be sorry for the things that are beyond my control."

She looked at him and smiled, "And I forgive you, Tacitus. I will *always* forgive you." Nona reached up and gently placed her lips onto his.

No! His mind shouted as she did, but he did not pull away. Instead, he pressed into her firmly and lost himself in the stolen moment, reveling in the feel of her touch, the warmth of her lips against his. By all rights, his mind continued to shout, she should've been *his!*

But she wasn't... and could never be.

No, the word replayed in his head and he pulled away from her. "I cannot do this, Nona. I - it shouldn't've gone this far. I apologize, please forgive-"

"Tacitus! Nona!" They both looked up in alarm to see Severus standing before them.

Tacitus paled as Nona composed herself quickly. She smiled sweetly and without so much as a gasp, began to speak, "Well, hello, my husband. I'm afraid that in a fit of anger, I may have branded your brother for life."

"Nona," he sighed, "you didn't-"

She put an even broader faux smile across her face, "I'm sorry, men, but I have womanly things at home that need tending. Goodbye, my husband. And, goodbye... Tacitus," she spoke to him over her shoulder, "I am... *sorry* for my behavior earlier." Her smile was painful as she walked away.

Tacitus stood, slack-jawed, partly in awe at Nona's quick and convincing recovery and partly in fear of his brother. Severus stepped towards him and taking his brother's chin in his black-gloved hand, he turned his face to the side, "Wow, she branded you well, Brother." He stood back, slightly ashamed, "I'm sorry, Tacitus. I must apologize for my wife's temper. I told her it wasn't your fault regarding my decision to take Aelia into the Order, but," he shrugged, "you know her as well as I do. That woman has a mind of her own. A *dangerous* mind."

Tacitus nodded awkwardly, "Yes. I-I do know that-"

"No matter!" His brother waved off the previous moment's events. "I came here for my own reasons anyway. Well," he stepped back, "what do you think?"

As Severus stood before him, hands outstretched, Tacitus finally noticed that his brother was wearing an entire suit made of black leather. Severus turned around slowly, the black cloak he wore waving slightly in the breeze as he did.

"Is that the new uniform of the Order?"

"It is."

"But, there are no markings? Nothing to say what you are or who you belong to."

He shook his head, "And I don't want there to be. We belong to no one but are in the service of *all* who fight on the side of the righteous and good."

Tacitus nodded, "Well-well, then I think it's very impressive, Severus. Very intimidating as well!"

The Protector laughed loudly and patted Tacitus on the shoulder, "Very good! As it should be!" He tugged at the high collar, "It is a little on the warm side, though."

"Well, then it will be good for the winter, which is due soon by the looks of things."

"Aye, I've noticed the change in the wind over these last few days."

Tacitus indicated the area in the distance beyond his brother, "I see that the border wall is finally up. How are the barracks coming along?"

"I hope to have the first one up by this time next year and then my scouts will send for recruits throughout the land and we will begin training."

Tacitus smiled, "It's all coming together finally, isn't it? Just as you and Father dreamed all those years ago when we were young."

Severus nodded solemnly, "It is, and I will never leave this village nor any of her people unprotected again. That is my vow and, like all vows that I have taken in this life, I stand by it, forever."

* * *

"One!"

Juko forcefully pulled his wooden sword upwards in response to Felix's count and struck it hard against the lower right side of the *palus* training post before him.

"Two!"

He repeated the same exact movement but this time hitting the thick piece of timber on the other side.

"Three!"

Juko gritted his teeth. His annoyance had been growing all morning and he was having trouble masking it as he lifted the wooden *gladius* above his head and brought it crashing down onto the upper right side of the *palus*.

"Four!"

He then struck the left side.

"One!" Felix began again but, this time, Juko made no movement. "One!" he repeated but again, Juko remained still. The trainer stalked closer to the N'bari, "Recruit, I gave you the count of *one!*"

Still silent, Juko impudently threw the *gladius* down into the dust beneath him.

"Recruit, what are you-"

"No!" He shouted through gritted teeth as he glared at the heavier built man, "I have had enough of this... *training*. All that I have learned so far is how to count to four!"

Euric sat up slightly in his seat upon the dais as he watched the scene unfold before him. His assistant, Posides the Spado, stood beside him holding a decorative sun umbrella over his head, "Sir, do you wish me to-"

"No, no," he motioned the exceedingly handsome young man away with a hand. "I will handle this on my own but first," a light smirk emerged, "I wish to see how it plays out."

"But," Posides beautiful face was awash in confusion, "don't you wish for him to fight at the Emperor's *munus* in one week's time?"

The *lanista* snickered coyly behind closed lips, "Oh, I very much do but you have to understand, Juko is a *different* sort of creature."

"How so? He seems incredibly defiant."

"He is defiant, yes, but it is *more* than just that." He stared out at the new recruit and watched as he began to argue further with the trainer. "You see, I have to make him *want* to fight and the only way to do that is to tweak him until he explodes. Rote drills, boredom, a constant authoritarian presence looking over his shoulder - *all* of it a carefully choreographed act to make him *want* to become the star of the arena. Just you watch, my boy, just you watch."

Felix, dressed only in the loincloth that marked him as a trainer, grabbed Juko by his practice tunic and shoved him roughly into the dirt. "Pick up your weapons, *worm*, and begin again."

Juko stood back up on his feet immediately. "I am done with this sham. This is not real fighting, this is-"

Felix grabbed the *pugio* from his side and was about to strike Juko with it when Euric shouted for him to, "*Halt!*" The Vandal, his gray robes whipping in the wind, stepped down from the dais and walked over to the pair.

"Juko, why do you refuse your training? Did we not reach a deal?"

"*That,*" the N'bari looked down at the wooden sword at his feet, "is no type of training. You wish me to compete in a week's time and yet only provide me with wooden sticks? I am no *novicus*-"

"But you are no *Tiro*, either. Only those gladiators who have made certain progressions can be called *Tiro* and you have done no such thing."

"Then tell me what the progressions are so that I might learn! What is it that I am lacking? Tell me and I will do that very thing!"

Euric looked upon the young N'bari and answered flatly, "You have yet to learn the *damnati ad gladium*."

"What is that?" He spat out angrily. "What does it mean?"

Euric stared at the sword on the ground as he answered, "That a gladiator must learn to die if the crowd wills it," he looked back up, " ...with *honor*."

Juko was stunned slightly by his words.

Euric shrugged, "But, you're right, Juko. I admit, I *have* been lax in your training." He examined the practice arena, hiding the many schemes that stirred behind his dark blue eyes, "Well, maybe not *lax* but reticent, certainly."

"But, I... I *know* how to die!" Juko continued in his defiance. "And-and if I am condemned to die, so be it. I will meet my death with honor-"

"No," Euric smiled, this time warmly, "no you won't. Not you, Juko. You will go down fighting, just as your brother did."

Juko's eyes lowered to the ground.

And I wouldn't have it any other way, the Vandal thought to himself.

Juko inhaled deeply, "I *want* to fight but I only want to fight as a *Tiro*, a *true* gladiator. I told you that I have fought before, trained by my brother. I will show you if needs be."

Euric put an arm across Juko's shoulder, "That's not a bad idea, actually. I haven't done you justice, my son. Yes, Juko, show me. Show me you are worthy of the title of *Tiro* and I will grant it to you." He looked over at the other gladiators who had stopped their training and had begun to gather around, "T'tembo, come over here."

The large, well-muscled man stepped from the crowd. He wore the same style of loincloth as the trainers, though his was of a different color denoting his rank of *palus*

primus - the highest rank of all the fighters in Euric's school. He made his way towards the *lanista* and knelt before him, "I am at your service."

Euric rolled his eyes and tapped T'tembo's shoulder with his flywhisk, "Get up, you fool! I can't stand all that... *pretense!*"

T'tembo nodded and arose from the ground in a single graceful motion that brought him side-by-side with Juko, who, while quite tall himself, stood only as high as the other man's shoulder. "What do you want of me, *lanista?*"

He laughed slightly to himself, "What I want of you, T'tembo, is to give me a practice match here with young Juko."

"Sir," he looked unsure, "I-"

"You would defy me?"

He bowed his head quickly, "No, *lanista*, never."

"Castor, equip our lead fighter with his own *lusoria arma*. We want to keep it... non-lethal. Juko, what do you choose: sword or-"

"No weapon," Juko answered flatly.

Euric seemed amused by his choice, "If that is what you wish." He leaned in and whispered closely next to Juko's ear, "But, even a wooden sword can do damage to an unprotected scalp. Do you still wish to remain unarmed?"

"I said 'no weapon' - but rarely am I unarmed."

"Your choice," he leaned back, "but if you win this, I will tell you some of what I know about your brother's death."

Juko's eyes flicked over to him, then straight ahead. The *lanista* took a few steps back and addressed the gladiators, "This will not be a timed match but it will be to the *proverbial* death. When you are beat, you must yield. Gladiators, ready?"

The two men, so mismatched in size, stood in the center of the training field in an area now ringed by the other gladiatorial recruits. The men began to murmur as they eyed each one and placed bets as to which would be their personal champion.

"We are ready, *lanista!*" T'tembo shouted out, then indicated to Juko he should repeat the same.

"Ah, yes, we are ready *lanista!*"

"Face your opponent, then, and take two large steps back."

They did as he commanded.

"Now," Euric raised his arm in the air, then shouted, "*begin!*" and brought it back down again.

As his arm lowered, T'tembo moved swiftly into action. He lunged for Juko with his heavy wooden sword but the smaller man was faster and spun away to the side quickly. The spin allowed Juko to close the space between him and T'tembo in just half a step. As he did, he then used the gladiator's own substantial leg to launch himself upon the larger man's neck. T'tembo, having experienced the unarmed combat style of his fellow N'bari many times in his youth, knew exactly what was coming. He hastily dropped his sword to the ground in order to throw the smaller man off of him before Juko had a chance to wrap his arms around T'tembo's thick neck.

Juko landed in the dust but rolled back up quickly. He hunched down, hearing Suna's voice in his head, instructing him from when they were training in their younger years, "Juko, listen to me. Imagine your feet are like long talons - like a dragon's! So long that they can grab onto the earth and nothing can move you!" Juko closed his eyes and pictured his feet rooting to the ground as he held his hands out, open before his body.

Meanwhile, T'tembo had retrieved his sword and soon began to charge at him, his footsteps so heavy that Juko could feel the vibrations in the ground beneath his own rooted feet. He opened his eyes as T'tembo lunged at him again and attempted to bring the heavy wooden sword down upon the top of his head. Just as the sword came down, Juko ducked even lower in his stance and wrapped his arms around the other man's legs, linking his hands together behind the thick man's calves as he did. He then suddenly stood up straight and flipped T'tembo onto his back with one smooth motion.

The gladiator fell hard onto the dust and the impact sent both his sword and shield scattering away in the distance as his breath caught in his chest and his eyes looked around wildly. Juko's move had caused T'tembo's brain to shift within his skull and it was taking every bit of the gladiator's strength to stay conscious. T'tembo shouted as best he could in his winded state, "I yield! I yield! *Lanista*, I yield!"

Juko looked down at the other man as his chest heaved, "I apologize, my friend, it was not personal. Also, very soon you will have quite a headache." He then looked out over the stunned crowd and asked Euric, "Have I shown you enough now?"

The Vandal's feigned disinterested sigh was perfectly deceptive, "Yes, well, I can't say that I'm all that surprised, really."

The N'bari warrior wiped at his forehead and felt the grit of the sand grate against his skin as he did, "So you will keep your promise, then?"

Euric answered, "Yes, you get your wish, Juko. I will tell you some of what I know."

"*And* you will promote me?"

"And I will promote you," he nodded. "But for now, go wash off, then join me in my office. T'tembo, let the *medicus* tend you."

Juko left the field, then went into the baths and washed himself. After drying, he changed into a new tunic and pulled on a pair of breeches. If there was one thing he hadn't grown accustomed to since his arrival, it was the Lycanian habit of wearing very few clothes. Granted the climate was warmer than his mountain village but he couldn't shake the feeling of vulnerability that the lack of breeches brought him.

He left the baths and walked through the underground, stone-braced tunnels that led him directly to Euric's darkly lit office. As he approached, he saw the Vandal pouring over a scroll atop his desk. Juko took the opportunity to examine the *lanista's* office and noticed that set in amongst the candles that encircled a shrine to the Adversary goddess was the highly sought after *Rudus*. The *Rudus* was a ceremonial sword that not only symbolized freedom but also indicated that the *lanista* had once been a gladiator himself; this fact surprised Juko.

He stepped into the room and Euric looked up from his scrolls.

"Ah, Juko, my son, please sit," he indicated the chair before his desk. "Would you care for some water?"

"No, I am not here for water. Just information."

"Yes," Euric shook his head earnestly. "I will do as I promised but first, let me ask you something."

"What?" Juko's felt his annoyance with the *lanista* returning rather quickly.

"What is it that you want more than anything in this world?"

"The information that you have about my brother."

The *lanista* laughed and stood up from the desk. He continued to speak as he walked to where Juko sat, "Yes, but *besides* that. What else in this world would make you happy?"

"Happier than having my brother back alive?"

Euric nodded, "Yes, son, happier than that."

Juko's fingers tightened around the arms of the chair as various thoughts ran through his mind. There were only two things in this world that Juko wanted but only one that he would acknowledge aloud. "Revenge," he said.

The *lanista* smiled slowly, "Exactly." He sat on the corner of his writing desk, "And I may just be able to procure you your revenge. How does that make you feel?"

Juko shook his head, "No, Vandal! You are playing games with me again! You torture me, lie to me - but still, you tell me nothing! You said you are not a liar but you have yet to tell me *any* truths!"

Euric's smile faded as he sighed, "You're right, son. It is a failing of mine." He glanced at the shrine across the room, "Do you see that?"

Juko looked at the statue.

"I'm not even supposed to have that in here. It's... *illegal*. Did you know that?"

"But, isn't it one of your many gods?"

Euric laughed shortly, "Ah, yes, *once*. But see, now there are only three gods: The Twin Brothers and the She-Wolf Mother. Worshipping anything else is against the law."

"Your country is very strange to me. How can a god cease to be a god just because you make a law against it?"

He stared at the statue of the Adversary, her beautiful womanly form draped in cloth as a set of feathered wings rose up behind her. "And what do you worship, my son?"

Juko was slow to respond, "If I am honest?... nothing and... and no one." He looked over at Euric, "But the N'bari people have only one god: the Ancient God."

"What is his name?"

Juko shrugged, "His name is 'God.'"

"That's very odd, isn't it?"

"*Lanista*, I am confused by your questions. You should know all of this, as you have trained many N'bari-

"Your brother was very religious." Euric turned back to face the young fighter. "Did you know that?"

"I... did, yes. He learned from my father."

"The Chieftain, correct?"

Juko nodded.

"Your brother talked of his clan very often. He spoke of your father, your mother and you, too."

"I'm surprised. He wasn't very fond of village life."

Euric laughed, "Oh, that much was *very* clear! But... he loved his family. They - *you*, were very important to him."

A rare smile touched Juko's eyes, "I am glad to hear that, at least."

The *lanista* sat back down behind his writing desk but when he spoke, his eyes seemed focused on something unseen, "Juko, what makes a man fight to the death?"

He shrugged, "Many men die for many different reasons."

"This is true, but your brother," he leaned in closer, "he only died for one reason and that reason was *family*."

Juko remained silent, cautiously watching Euric as he tried to understand what the shady man's angle was.

"You say you don't care that your brother had a woman-"

"No, I said I didn't care *about* her and I don't."

"Perhaps you should listen to what I have to say about her before you make such a judgment," Euric's eyed him with restraint. "She was like a daughter to me and your brother, a son."

"Fine," he said.

"Lady Catherine of Tyre was well-known and well-loved here in Odalia. But, first, you have to understand that not all Lords and Ladies bother themselves with the public. I mean, why should they, really? Our world does not revolve the same way as theirs does. Their concerns are not our concerns. Do you understand?"

"I suppose. As I mentioned, your country is very strange to me. In my clan, those that are highborn have a responsibility and a duty to those of the lower castes."

Euric let out a puff of air, "Well, they are quite the opposite here. Those that are highborn have very little time for the rest of us. Lady Catherine was different, though." His eyes misted over slightly with memory, "Her father became the representative for the Ala District when she was just a teenager."

"The Ala District?"

Euric nodded, "Yes, Odalia is separated into five districts and the Ala District is the worst of the bunch. It's an awful place steeped in poverty, crime, debauchery - every sin available! I have only been there once and, let me tell you, people will stab you in the back for a piece of moldy bread!"

Juko's eyebrows knitted together but he let the *lanista* continue uninterrupted.

"The Emperor would usually give such Districts to his most unpopular Lords. If they weren't murdered in their sleep by cutthroats, they usually left the Capital and returned to their homelands. So, for whatever reason, Emperor Tiberius didn't like Lord Heron, so he gave him the District as a joke.

"Only, it was never a joke to Lady Catherine and very soon after her father became the representative, she began to make visits to the District with her mother. At first, they started bringing bread and flour to the poorest of the poor about once a month. Then from

there, after seeing the sadness and devastation that had spread to all of the District's inhabitants, their trips became almost daily affairs. Even after her mother grew ill, Lady Catherine still attended ceremonies there and always showed even the most worthless life a bit of kindness." An unconscious smile brushed across Euric's face as he continued, "But she *detested* the gladiatorial games!"

"How did you know?"

"Because she told me!" he laughed. "She had her entourage roll into here one day and demanded to see me. I was not amused, I have to say, but she stood in *that* exact spot and shouted at me for quite a while at our first meeting."

Juko seemed surprised, "And you... *allowed* that?"

"Oh no, not at all! I shouted back with all the fury that my ancestors had at their disposal but..." he held his hands up as if in surrender, "she was undeterred."

"What did she say to you?"

"Oh, she called me '*cruel*' and said that I was a slave owner and that my gladiators were treated no better than animals."

Juko thought of what T'tembo had said to him when they had first met and then remembered his own subsequent punishment for 'disobedience.' "How did you respond?"

"As I said, I shouted the place down! Who knows what I said? I probably called her and her ancestors a few choice words but she didn't even shiver or back away in fear - not even once! She simply pursed her lips and demanded action."

"What sort of action?"

He looked down at his desk for a moment, then continued, "Well, I showed her the barracks. I made the men disrobe before her." He grinned devilishly, "I thought *surely* that would frighten her away! But, no, she simply held her head high and began to question them. She *actually* questioned them!" Euric sighed, "All except your brother. He had refused to disrobe or leave his bed. Something to do with your religion, I think."

Juko nodded, "Yes. Modesty is highly prized in our clan."

"Yes, well, she questioned a few of the men and found they weren't clamoring to break down the doors to leave, that they were well-fed and housed decently. I invited her to come see one of the practice sessions. It's," he laughed knowingly, "not unusual for highborn ladies to visit, so she wouldn't've been out of place - though they are rarely there for the men's benefit, if you-"

Juko grew impatient, "I don't understand where my brother-"

"Give it time, son, give it time! Storytelling is an art! A well timed, perfectly paced art! Now, where was I? ...Oh yes, your brother. So, she *did* begin to attend several practice sessions and she and I would have endless hours of conversation about the morality of bloodsport. I enjoyed her ideas very much and in my younger years, would have been proud to be her champion in the arena, but," he shrugged, "I couldn't change her mind. I think that she liked that I tried, though. Then, one day, just to prove a point, I called your brother over. I asked if he had ever felt like an animal."

"What did he say?"

"The truth. He told her that the only time he had ever felt like an animal was whenever he walked down the streets of the Margarite District." He leaned in closer to Juko, "See, the Margarite District is where she and her family lived. She was horrified at such a revelation and so I left them to talk about it with one another. Well, argue, really. A lot... *loudly*. And maybe that's where I failed."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, first you have to understand the laws of the land that had recently been passed. The harshest one being that anyone of Lycanian decent, as Lady Catherine was, cannot mix socially with anyone of a Bestial descent. We Bestials are just that to the Lycanians. We are animals. Less than, in some cases."

Juko frowned, "It is a ridiculous law."

"Ah, but is it? How about *your* clan?"

He looked at Euric matter-of-factly, "We marry and socialize with all members of the N'bari-"

"Yes, but what of someone outside of your people?"

"I... do not know."

Euric gave him a knowing look, "Listen, my son, it is human nature to separate ourselves into groups but it is equally just as much human nature to desire that which is forbidden." He sighed and rubbed his temples, "Of *course* I knew what was going on in the beginning. Suna thought he was so clever, sneaking her in at night. I let it go, thinking they were just young people enjoying what young people enjoy. But... before long..."

"What?"

"Suna became distracted during training. He then lost his first match in the arena after being undefeated for nearly an entire year. Luckily, it was not a death match but it soon became very apparent to me that they were in love and that was a dangerous thing." He took a deep breath, "I confronted Suna and he admitted that it was true. He belonged to

her and she, him but, Juko, the law *is* the law and they both knew that what they wanted could never become a reality. I tried, son, I *really* tried to keep them apart.. but, even I have a weakness for such things..." His eyes became far away again and he fell silent.

"Tell me what happened, *lanista*," he prompted, annoyed.

"Well, I will tell you this much," he looked at Juko, "those two became like my children. I found myself protecting them at the expense of my own life! Suna needed to be freed from the arena but he hadn't done enough to earn his, shall we say... *independence*... and his fights were beginning to suffer from his distraction, so he had even less of a chance. Then, one day they came to me and told me the news."

"Which was?"

"That Lady Catherine was with child, which, you must know, is a crime that is punishable by death."

Juko swallowed deeply, "What did you do?"

He laughed slightly, but it was edged with sadness, "I had them married! By the gods, I did!"

"What?"

His voice cracked slightly, "Late one night, under the Temple of the Two Brothers, I paid the High Priestess to secretly married them with me as a witness. I'm an old romantic, if you must know. I thought, naively, that if they were married the law would somehow have a better outcome for them. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess that everyone loves a love story! Plus, they were a perfect match for each other - as if the gods themselves had carved them from the same piece of marble." His face looked pained with memory, "So, for one tortuous week after they were married, Suna remained here at the arena and Lady Catherine at her home. That is, until I came up with a plan."

"Which was?"

"I would give him my *Rudus*, the symbol of a truly free man. So we planned their escape. They planned to returned to your clan but..." he shook his head.

"What happened? Tell me what happened?"

"No," the hardness returned to the Vandal's face. "I said I would only give you *some* of the information, not *all*. You want the rest, you fight in one week's time *and* you win."

"Damn you!" Juko stood and banged his fists down onto the writing desk. "Damn you, Euric, to the darkest pits! You cannot play with people's lives!"

Euric stood slowly, "I am not playing with people's lives, I am ensuring my own. You fight for me as promised and you will know the rest."

"But I want my vengeance!"

"And you shall have it, my son. I promise you that. In one week's time, you will know the man that killed your brother and you will end his life."

* * *

Moriana and Timonus had made it to the caves just before nightfall but the mist that had been so unrelenting during their trek had left them both cold and exhausted. Once inside, Moriana rested atop a small bolder, shivering in the fading light. Timonus saw her shaking and removed his cape. "Here," he said as he gave it to her, "I know it's not much but the material is thick and it's been waterproofed."

She stared at him a moment before taking it as she was unfamiliar with such courtesy, "Th-thank you, Legate."

Timonus nodded, then studied their surroundings to see exactly where they stood in terms of survival for the night. Outside the cave the mist became rain. "Well," he began, "the horses had our food stores, cooking supplies and waterskins, so I suppose we're basically starting from scratch here." He rested his hands on his hips, "By the gods, I just realized that I don't even have my tinderbox!"

Without uttering a word, Moriana bent down and retrieved something from her leather shoe. As she sat back up, she held a small loop made of iron above her head.

"A fire starter!" Timonus exclaimed at the sight of it. "You magnificent woman, you!"

She smiled despite her discomfort from the cold, "I t-told you that I had resources." Moriana then reached down to her other shoe and pulled up a small flat rock, "Here-here's the flint."

He smiled warmly as he took the fire starting tools from her, "Well, that's most of our problems solved but we still lack tinder."

She indicated with a nod over her shoulder, "There are plenty of dried mushrooms along the walls there. I left them during my last walk. We can use them to make *amadou* for tinder. There should also be some dry wood and an empty waterskin that we can fill in the rain but unfortunately," Moriana frowned, "no food."

The Legate stared at the *venefica* with slight admiration, "Mother Wolf, I wish you had been with us on my last patrol!"

She smiled, unable to hide her pleasure at his approval, "Why? Was it a particularly difficult one?"

"Yes," he answered, grunting as he bent over to gather the materials, "we were in Bestial land up north, no water in sight and very little food. The temperatures were *freezing!*"

"No fire, then?"

He shook his head, "They wouldn't stay lit; the winds were too high. We were ill-equipped for the terrain." Timonus stood, "In truth, we really had no business being up there."

"So, what did you do?"

"Well," he carried the pile of supplies over to where Moriana sat and began to stack the wood in a pyramid over the small mound of shredded and dried mushrooms, "first, we lost nearly half our forces to the elements, then another third of *them* to starvation, and after that, well, we just cut our losses and returned home."

"And the Emperor didn't have you hanged?" she was astonished by the casualness of his tone.

He chuckled, "Ah, but, you see, it wasn't Emperor Tiberius, it was his father."

"Oh... the...," she searched her memory, "the Peacebringer, right?"

"Yes," he began to strike the flint against the iron loop, "at least, that is the name he is remembered by. The patrol was an exploration mission-"

"Wait, but you said it was your 'last' patrol?"

He stopped in mid-strike as a thoughtful look crossed his face, "I did, didn't I?"

"Has it... *really* been that long?"

Timonus returned to his task and before long a spark hit the dried mushrooms and it immediately began to smoke. His face broke out into a relieved smile, "Aha! We have a spark!" He looked up at the *venefica* again, "There'll be no cold, dank cave for us tonight!"

She smiled in return, although it was distant, wistful. "I've spent many a cold and dank night here, even with a fire."

He handed her tools back to her, "Does it always rain in this part of Lycania? It seems like it's been non-stop since we left the Caves of the *Veneficas*."

"Yes, it is often very dreary on the shore but," she shrugged, "you adjust and get used to it."

"I suppose," he rearranged the wood so that it would catch the flame better.

Moriana pulled the cloak tighter around her, "You never answered me, by the way. Was that your last patrol?"

He sighed and stared at the tiny fire that had begun, "Yes, I suppose it was. I was promoted soon after we returned and then the Peacebringer died and his son became Emperor. I've served by his side ever since."

She was surprised by him, yet again, "But that's been over a decade!"

"Yes. It has."

"Do you ever miss being," she waved her hand, "out there? Where the action is?"

He sat back on his haunches, "In some ways, maybe." He reflected for a moment before answering further, "But being stationed here in Odalia has its advantages."

"Like?"

"Well, my wife, for instance. We spent the first half of our marriage separated by war and patrols. Now, I see her nearly every day and our sons as well." A smile touched his face as he thought of them.

"I... didn't know you had a family."

"Well," he laughed, "of course not. How would you, really?"

Moriana stood, "I'll sort food for us-"

"But you're soaked! You'll catch your death before you catch anything else!"

She shrugged, "I've been here, in this state, more times than I care to remember."

Moriana indicated the area just outside the entrance, "There's plenty of samphire grass growing out there among the rocks, we can always steam the stalks to tide us over, but," she began to grin, "I'm usually pretty good at finding a rabbit or a lizard or two - not to mention the flocks of birds that are always around here as well."

He looked at her curiously, "And just how do you intend to capture such prey?"

She was still grinning and, in the low firelight of the cavern, Timonus could see that the blackness of her lips was beginning to fade away. Moriana then triumphantly untied what he had thought had been a rope belt from around her waist and held it up for him to see.

"Ah," Timonus laughed, "a slingshot! My dear, I'm beginning to believe that you might could survive anything!"

She gave him a pleased smile, "That has always been my intention!" Moriana then walked closer to the entrance, "Would you like to watch, Legate? I'm quite deadly with this thing."

"I would, actually." He joined her and she began to gather stones as the rain eased off. Within a moment she found a small but heavy and slightly roundish one. She tossed it in her

hand and seemingly satisfied with its weight, she then put a finger to her lips and issued Timonus a, "Shhh."

He nodded and faded into the shadows of the entrance to give her a wide enough berth for hunting while still being able to watch her. From his vantage point, not only was he able to observe Moriana but he could also examine the surrounding terrain a little better. The skies were still a murky gray but he could see that had the sun been shining, the cliffs themselves would have been a spectacular sight.

Interspersed within the rocky outcropping before him were small bits of green shoots growing up and there were even a few sparse trees that reached their bare branches to the sky. As Moriana sought her prey, Timonus tried his best to stand on his toes and look over the nearby cliff's edge, which, although still a good six or seven meters away, made his stomach twirl at the height of it. Past the edge, out against the horizon, he could see the unsettled and foaming waters that swirled against jagged black rocks.

Just then he heard a strange noise followed by Moriana shouting, "Yes! Got him!"

Timonus turned his head and saw the *venefica* proudly holding up a rather good-sized rabbit. He laughed at their fortune, "I can't believe it!"

"Yes, we will certainly eat well tonight, Legate!" she grinned as if she were a young child proud of their latest clay creation as she brought the rabbit into the cave. "I can skin it and everything!"

"Excellent! For I fear my skills are a little... out of practice." Based on her exuberance, he couldn't help but began to wonder if he had been wrong about his original assumption of just how old she was. He had placed her at a mid-third decade but as her outer appearance began to melt away with the rain, he was beginning to think she was quite a bit younger.

A little while later they were both happily dining on the slightly chewy rabbit, supplemented with a few salty stalks of samphire that had been grilled along in the fire as well. "You know," Timonus began as he tore at a piece of leg, chewing as he spoke, "I thought your lips were black from poison."

Moriana instantly raised a hand to her mouth, "Oh! I-" He'd caught her off guard. "It - they should be," she sighed.

"And your fingers, too? Are those just stained with dye as well?"

She looked down at her lap feeling a bit ashamed and nodded, "Yes."

"Is that typical among the *venefica*?"

She nodded again, "Nearly all the younger ones, except the Silver Sisters and those that practice smoke inhalation regularly - they come by the Stain naturally."

"I don't understand. Why do it?"

She smiled, "Because to outsiders, true Staining shows wisdom and experience."

He continued to chew as he thought. "So, how long have you been a *venefica*?"

"Nearly three years now."

Timonus remembered her story from earlier, when she told him about the time that Mother Marcella had come upon her when she was around fourteen. He did the math quickly and nearly choked on his meal, "Wait - you're only seventeen?"

"Maybe," she shrugged, "I'm not sure. I've never had reason to keep a record of such things."

Timonus was stunned into silence. After a moment she became concerned with his lack of response and asked, "Is that... upsetting to you... or-"

"No," he shook his head, "I'm just surprised at your being so young yet being so self-reliant."

The pleased smile reappeared on her face, "I told you, I am a survivor. I always have been."

"Well, Moriana, you certainly have my admiration, I'll give you that."

Her face took on an odd expression as she looked uncomfortably down at her lap again, eyeing her half finished piece of rabbit, "It... it's Hanna."

"What?"

"My, um," she cleared her throat and looked up at him, "my *real* name, you asked earlier about it. Well, it's Hanna." She laughed nervously, "Though no one has called me that in quite awhile."

"Well, Hanna," he smiled, "you have taught me many things on our little adventure so far. I look forward to what tomorrow and Feronia brings us."

"Yes, well, we *veneficas* don't think of the future. We concentrate only on the present," she flashed him a quick smile then looked away before he could see the pain that appeared behind it. "But for now, Legate, we should rest."

* * *

Lucan's heart pounded heavily within his wide chest as he sneaked in and out amongst the shadows of the palace and entered a narrow door that was located behind a heavy, large tapestry. Depicted on the tapestry was, as some citizens of Lycania would

argue, a slight misrepresentation of the Peacebringer's triumphant return to Odalia atop a resplendent elephant.

The room he walked into was small and dark. A tiny window near the ceiling let the slightest streak of silver moonlight fling itself across a table that was taking up most of the space in the cramped area. On top of the table, he could see three sets of hands resting in the luminescence while the entirety of the rest of their owners' bodies remained in shadow. The pair of hands in the middle possessed long gnarled fingers, stained black. They remained clasped even as the slightly smoky voice that they belonged to spoke aloud, "Lucan, my little man, are the plans in place?"

"They are, M'lady." His tiny eyes darted around, as they were wont to do.

"And what of the Legate?"

"He is on the mission to Feronia, just as we planned. I am hoping he will not return for two weeks at least. Although, as I know him, once he discovers there is no actual root blight to speak of, he will return immediately."

"But, he is with us?"

Lucan nodded vigorously, "Oh, yes, very much!"

"And the Vandal? Has he done his part?"

"You mean the *munus*? Yes, though...", he hesitated.

"What is it, little man?"

"He... he hasn't many fighters to display."

"That is not our problem nor our interest. All we care about is that he provides the *munus*."

Lucan nodded once, "Yes, M'lady, that is a definite."

"Does he know of our plans?"

"No, absolutely not. I made sure of it."

"Then," the owner of the raspy voice leaned forward but all Lucan could see was an unsettling smile within the darkness, her as lips black as the shadows around her face but her teeth bright white, "gentlemen, we will put our plan into motion. The Empire of Lycania is a ripe peach, ready for the plucking."

"Y-yes, M'lady," Lucan bowed nervously. "The Mother Wolf protects us all."

The voice in the shadows chuckled, "Yes, may the Mother Wolf protect *all* of her children, even the wayward ones."

* * *

Chapter Four

"What is it that vexes you, my husband? You seem lost among your thoughts out here." Nona pulled her antique woolen wrap tighter around her shoulders as she approached Severus. The winds around them were changing and though the air was still warm, the breeze held within it a chill that she could feel deep inside her bones.

She had wandered out to the clearing after having spotted Severus from the front stoop of their home as she was preparing the evening meal. He was standing against the newly completed wall and staring off into the distance. He had been doing so for quite awhile and it was concern for his strange behavior that had driven her to his side.

Severus was slow to answer as he rested his elbows atop the chest-high dry stone wall and stared out across the newly cleared field. How many years had he worked to clear this land? How many months had it taken to haul the stones up from the shore and place the wall, layer by layer, course by course, until it stood strong? It did not matter because now it was before him, real and complete.

He responded to his wife the only way he knew how, "Your concern is unneeded; I have many thoughts in my head that you are not privy to nor would I want you to be."

Nona pursed her lips, stiffening at the slight, "Yes. I know this quite well."

He looked at her briefly in surprise, then back out across the bare field, "I'm... sorry, Nona, I..." He could think of no way to finish his sentence. He hadn't meant for his words to come out so harsh, nor so incomplete. What Severus had *truly* meant to say was that there were a great many things on his mind and he did not want to burden her with them. His silence had only arisen as he had searched for a way to quell the painful memories that had recently floated up, unbidden, to the surface of his mind.

Feeling that her attempts to console him had been in vain, Nona took a step back, "I should tend to the children, dear husband," - her latter address of him came out slightly tinged with venom. "Dinner will be served soon; I do hope you will join us." She turned away and abandoned him to his thoughts.

Severus glanced briefly at his wife as she walked back to their home and a look of sadness crossed his face. He wanted nothing more than to let her know what existed inside of him but he was afraid - afraid that if she knew the truth of the things he had done in this life, that it would destroy her.

Severus turned his gaze back out upon the land, slowly examining every inch of turf until his eyes came to rest at the site where the barracks of the Order would soon stand.

Unlike the timber homes of the Cavalli, the barracks would be built using the same stones he had used for the wall and then topped with thatched roofs. He would be glad to see the Order rise again as he and his father had dreamt so many years ago.

The Order, once a legendary guild world-renowned for their skillful sword prowess on the battlefield, had a long and varied legacy dating back to a time when history wasn't written down but instead spoken aloud. Originally known as the *Gabrantovici*, or "horse-riding warriors", the Order's membership had numbered well into the thousands during its apex. At the time, the Cavalli were still separated into small nomadic bands that stretched wide across the open plains and it was because of this that they lacked a properly unified military defense. The Order soon became the perfect surrogate to staunch the steady flow of attacks from their Lycanian enemies who were fast encroaching from the North.

But as the attackers grew in numbers, not even the might of the Order could stop the conquering tide as it moved ever forward. Soon the Lycanian forces began to overwhelm the Order, thus bringing about the decade-long Desolate Wars and by the time the struggle was over, the Order's numbers had been all but decimated. Then, as all members of the Cavalli had been forced into the Aulus Forest, they were no longer the great horse-riding warriors they had once been but had instead become lumbering swordsmen on foot.

Sadly, with each passing year after the end of the war, it became more and more difficult to find men willing to fight in the Order and within two generations the numbers had dwindled to near nil. Then, with the death of Severus' father and his fellow Elders, the Order's fate was sealed and it was no more.

Somehow sensing the inevitability of its demise, Severus' father, Atticus, had championed his oldest son to lead a new Order on the day that he had reached his first decade. Atticus led the boy into a clearing deep within the forest and as they walked further and further into the trees, Severus became less familiar with his surroundings.

Finally, as the sunlight dimmed overhead, they stopped and Atticus had Severus sit upon a fallen log as he disappeared further into the copse for a brief moment. When he returned, he bore with him a sword that was unlike any that the boy had ever seen. It was large, made of heavy steel and longer than Severus was tall. His father thrust it towards him and commanded that he take it. As Severus grasped the hilt within his small hands, he nearly fell forward with the weight of it.

"Severus, my son," his father righted him as the boy struggled to stand, "you may not be able to lift this weapon now but you must believe that one day you will hold it high, high

above your head and the heads of your enemies. It is the sword of your father's father, and *his* father, going back seven generations."

"But what will I do with it, Father?"

He knelt down and grasped the sword alongside Severus, "My son, I have seen in you the markers of a great swordsman and I believe you will lead others to be as well. So, take this sword with me, my son, and together we will rebuild the Order."

The young Severus accepted his father's legacy and every day that followed, for hours at a time, they would practice in the clearing - sword clashing against sword as the sound of their strikes echoed throughout the forest and over the village of Two-Crows.

He thought of his father, many years later, lying upon his deathbed after he had been mortally wounded during their fight with a Giant. His face was pained as the infection from the wound sped its way through his body. He had refused Tacitus' pain-killing salves, saying that a death from battle was the most honorable death he could imagine for himself and he wouldn't see it diminished in any way.

As he slipped away upon his bed, he called Severus to his side. "My son, you must promise to carry on the Order. All of our plans, all of our training, you must pass it on to the coming generations for one day it will be you in this bed and the Order will remain our family's only legacy."

"Of course I will, Father," he had answered swiftly, trying his best to appease the old warrior before he took the Great Walk.

"Your mother and brothers," he continued, "they will be of great help to you in this endeavor. All save Tacitus. He is not a fighter, my son, and even though the Elders will say different, there is no shame in that. You must *never* let him feel shame for that, for he has a gift. He brings life to this world just as easily as we take it. His path will be hard but he is your blood and thus, your responsibility. Please look after him, always, my son."

Severus shook himself abruptly from the unwelcomed memory, casting a glance towards his home. He saw the smoke rising from its small chimney, which told him that Nona was cooking and waiting for him as she had every day since they were married.

Severus then thought of Nona. Even if no romantic love existed between the two, they had come to respect each other, which was just as well since Severus had never been one for romantic ideals. He wasn't put off by her lack of love and, in fact, thought it preferable in case he should die in battle one day.

Battle... he laughed shortly to himself. He hadn't seen battle in years. Not since the rebellion and even that had been sixteen years ago and the world had seemingly become a

much more civilized place since those days. Treaties were struck more often than swords, trade deals were negotiated and gold had become more valuable than honor. Gone were the days of Severus the Giant-Killer, the Protector, the Defeater of the Rebels. Gone were the days where he could take a life without blinking and mortality had no meaning. The wild warrior that had existed with the flowing black hair and the war stains inked upon his body was no longer there and instead, all that was left in his place was an aging broken man with a receding gray hairline and joints that ached whenever it rained.

When had he changed? When had he become the 'old man' that his father had always been? Sadly, Severus knew the answer; it had happened that horrible night, all those years ago. His hazel eyes hardened at the memory of his brother lying in his arms, barely clinging to life and begging to be slain.

Severus had left Two-Crows that evening in search of Otho and his gang. Seneca had tried to stop him, of course. Telling him he'd never catch up to the rebels on foot as they had horses but Severus ignored him and left anyway - swearing he would be back before the Purification Ceremony.

A fairly proficient tracker, Severus found the gang's trail almost immediately as he tread carefully into the dense Aulus Forest. To be fair, his prey had not made it difficult, as most were still drunk from the night before and they had become careless. He found the gang in a clearing not too far from Two-Crows, lounging around a fire. Severus hid in the nearby trees and watched them, waiting for his chance.

He was disgusted by what he saw. His once-brethren were slovenly laid out, slurring through songs that were a source of pride to his people. As he continued to watch, Severus' gaze then fell upon the bloodstained rebel-leader who was reclining against a fallen log in the midst of them, his shirt open to the waist and his bare chest covered in spilt Two-Crows ale. Otho grinned like a fool as he hummed along with the raucous singers, raising a tankard with one hand while haphazardly slicing the air with his sword in the other.

Severus spat a curse out under his breath but remained hidden in the nearby trees.

"Ah, m'boysss," Otho slurred, "a rebel's life for us, eh?"

They roared back in unison, raising more cups of drink towards him.

"And as long as those horse-lovers are off fighting one another up at the front, we can keep cleaning up back here!" he took another swig, laughing absurdly into his cup as he did.

"All the ale, horses and women we can take! Gods, I love this war!"

Severus burned with rage at his words and quickly took stock of all of those positioned in the camp. Besides Otho himself, the only other obviously armed rebel was a

large man, standing mute against a tree behind his leader, a wood axe leaning against his leg. It was a long weapon, with a sturdy head and its edge looked as if it had been sharpened to its most deadly point. The man who wielded it had arms as thick as the tree that he stood against, which told Severus that he was no novice.

Taking a deep breath, Severus stepped out from his hiding place behind the trees, unsheathing his sword and calling the rebel-leader out, "Otho!"

The drunken leader made no moves to stand from his reclining position as his gaze wavered around the woods and shakily landed on Severus, "Who're you?"

Severus remained silent.

Otho threw back his head and laughed, "Ah, it doesn't matter, does it? Come on and join us, Brother. We got plenty!"

Severus lifted his sword with both hands into a defensive stance, "You are not my brother."

Otho's expression changed and he seemed to sober up slightly. He repeated, "Who are you?"

"I am Severus of Two-Crows."

A few in the gang gasped and muttered, "It's the Giant-Killer!"

The axe-wielder grabbed his weapon.

"Two-Crows?" Otho stood up clumsily. "That's the village we just raided, innit?" He grinned again, "Best haul yet. Did we... kill your wife? Maybe your daughter?" He laughed, "Well, you'll be happy to know they gave us great pleasure before they died."

As the men around him laughed heartily, Severus said nothing but gripped his sword tighter.

Otho stopped laughing, "You do realize we outnumber you, Giant Killer. You will not survive this."

"I only care that you don't."

"Well, if that is your choice, then, men, please end him for me while I sit here and drink some more."

A group of five drunken rebels charged at Severus. He was quick to dispose of the first two, stabbing one through the heart and cutting the throat of the other, but was unable to stop a third one from going behind him as a fourth, working in tandem with the other, made an attempt to disarm him.

Otho laughed and looked over at the man wielding the axe who had not yet moved from his position, "It appears his end will be quicker than I thought. I might not even need

you in this fight. Giant-Killer, pfft," he drank as he muttered into his cup, "no one's ever killed a Giant anyway."

Just as his fourth attacker was about to strip him of his sword, Severus dropped to his knees, which easily threw off the one that was behind him trying to pin his arms. Severus immediately spun and stabbed him straight through the abdomen, then, not hesitating for a moment, the master swordsman pulled his sword from the man's body and in one swift move, plunged it directly into the heart of other that had only moments before attempted to take it from him. That left only one remaining attacker before him, whose face went pale as he leaned over to vomit.

Otho grew angry and shouted, "Kill him!"

The would-be attacker shook his head and took off running, deep into the forest.

The rebel-leader rolled his eyes and said to the axe-wielder, "Fine, *you* kill him and I'll double what I owe ya!"

The man nodded and charged at Severus, swinging immediately for his head.

Severus ducked and rolled away. As he stood, the axe came downwards towards him again but this time Severus caught its sharp edge with his sword and pushed it away.

"You know," Otho began, "you're not half bad. You should consider joining up with me."

Severus ignored Otho's attempts at distraction as the axe was once more pulled back, only to be slammed down against him yet again. This time, though, his attacker had predicted Severus' actions and pulled the axe away at the last second, smashing the end of its handle into the base of Severus' spine. A feeling akin to a lightning strike flashed through his limbs as he stumbled forward, his breath momentarily taken away.

"Then again, maybe not. Tell me, Giant-Killer, what do you want it to say on your grave? 'He died bravely as he tripped and fell?'" Otho cackled again.

The axe-wielder kicked Severus in the stomach, causing him to roll over on to his back as the world before him became disjointed and blurred. "No...," he muttered as his chest heaved. The attacker placed his leather-booted foot upon Severus' throat and as he tried vainly to remove it, the other man raised his axe high above his head, preparing to bring it down upon Severus' head and cleave him in two. Severus fumbled for his sword in the leaf litter beside him and, grasping it about the middle of the blade in the half-sword grip that his father had taught him for such an occasion, he slammed the hilt of it into the axe-wielders abdomen. The other man lost his breath and dropped the axe next to Severus head as he doubled forward. Severus jumped up quickly, flipping his sword around the right

way as he did and stabbed his attacker through the chest, killing him instantly. His body dropped to the ground, kicking up a pile of dried leaves as it did.

Otho snarled, "Fine, you win." He looked at Severus, "I am in no mood or shape to fight you. I'll give you gold and horses and we'll call it even, alright?"

Severus was silent as he cautiously stepped forward, his sword out before him.

"Look," Otho dropped his tankard and lifted his palms, "I submit. Take me in and do what you would with me. I am at your mercy, Friend."

"Every word from your mouth stinks of a lie," Severus answered back tersely.

"Well," Otho lowered his hands, "then you appear to be one of the smarter men that I've met around here." Using his foot to toss his own sword upwards, he caught it in his hand and gave Severus a smile. The two then began to circle each other, taking a moment to test each other's skill with ineffectual swipes that landed blade against blade.

"Why," Otho continued to speak as they circled, "are you so determined to see to my demise?"

Severus lunged forward, but Otho parried the strike, knocking his blow uselessly away.

"As you can see, Friend," the leader continued, "I am not unskilled. Perhaps you've met your match at last, Giant-Killer?"

Severus gritted his teeth and engaged Otho in a series of strikes and parries. They each fought hard, making their way around the small clearing as they clashed, but each continued to deflect the other's blows.

Otho arrogantly spat at his opponent, "You are no match for me; I was trained by the best of the Cavalli."

Severus eyes narrowed as he struck back, "I find that hard to believe."

"Do you? Am I not as good as yourself? Perhaps better?" Otho swiped at him, but Severus managed to jump back from the blade before it connected with his flesh.

"No, because my father was the best there ever was in the Cavalli and he didn't train *you*."

"No but I *was* trained by Magnus the Outcast!"

The revelation almost halted Severus in his place but he recovered quickly, "Then you are no Cavalli! And neither are you a rebel!"

He laughed, "Your people are distracted, fighting amongst themselves. So I took the opportunity when it presented itself and now, everything that was yours is now mine."

"Magnus was a traitor and a thief. He served only himself and if you are a student of his, then you are no better."

"Traitor may be debatable but he did teach me that the Cavalli's talk of brotherhood and family is nothing but a lot of blustering wind."

"You're wrong." Severus stated and sensing Otho's stamina decreasing, pushed his attack harder.

They fought for a little while longer in breathless silence as Otho became more and more winded. When it was clear that Otho's stamina was all but depleted, Severus executed his own parry with enough force to knock the sword from the other man's hand.

Otho looked panicked as he stood unarmed before his opponent; it wasn't an emotion that he was familiar with. Severus stuck the point of own his sword against Otho's throat and walked him backwards, up against a tree.

"Look," the rebel-leader laughed nervously, his hands raised, "we can make a deal, right? Everyone can be bought, what's your price?"

"Is that what Magnus taught you? That anyone can be bought?" Severus stepped closer eyeing Otho's bare, ale-covered chest. He lowered his sword to the other man's ribs, which rapidly rose and shrunk with his every fear-filled breath.

"Wait, wait - what're you doing? Look, we can come to a deal, I swear! Please!" His panic grew even more as Severus pressed his sword tip into his skin and dragged it in a straight line down his chest, causing Otho to cry out in pain. As the blood began to drip from the wound, Severus then took his sword and made another line perpendicular to the first one, giving the wound the appearance of the letter "T".

"You're a thief, Otho."

"Alright, yes, so what?" He grimaced at the pain of his wounds, "You never saw something you wanted and just reached out and took it?"

Severus ignored his questions, "And you're also a murderer."

"No. Now see, see that's wh-where you're wrong. I never killed anybody! Maybe my men did, but I didn't!"

"Are you afraid now, Otho?"

He started to nod, his face covered in sweat and dirt. "Yes, I'm-I'm terrified. Is that what you want to hear?"

"No," Severus shook his head and sliced open Otho's belly with one quick smooth swipe of his sword.

The other man cried aloud and fell to the ground, wrapping his arms around his abdomen in order to try and keep his insides from tumbling out onto the leaves.

Severus knelt down beside the dying man, "I should tell you, a belly wound takes a long time to kill a person. It is a painful and slow death, which means you will have a lot of time to beg the gods for forgiveness."

"No, Giant-Killer, no, kill me now... just kill me now, please... don't leave me here... not like this... please!"

Severus shook his head, "My brother begged the same of you and you never granted his request and so now, neither will I. You die here, alone, as a coward, a thief and a murder." He turned and walked away as the dying man begged for him to come back and end his agony and suffering.

After Tacitus had regained consciousness a few days later, he never spoke again of Otho and his gang and Severus had never told him of the bloody vengeance that he had taken that night on his behalf.

A line of newly commissioned guards flanked each side of Tiberius' marble throne in the crowded *curia*. Formed from the battlefield's elite, they stood as silent and unmoving statues before the members of the Emperor's court, each armed with a spear and a Lycanian Long Shield. In the last few days, as Tiberius' suspicions of an assassination attempt on his life grew, the guards had become a steady presence in the palace, patrolling her halls both day and night.

Nearby, the Emperor's son, Spurius, stood silently next to the throne and, along with his father, stared out over the audience of the most powerful people that still remained in Odalia. The child's large brown eyes, an uncommon color for a Lycanian, scanned the room and paused a moment when they fell upon Euric the Vandal standing towards the back of the crowd. The young boy grinned and waved upon seeing him, for there was nothing more exciting to the young Spurius than a *munus* and seeing the *lanista* reminded him of the upcoming week's festivities.

Euric gave a hesitant nod to the prince but remained unusually quiet amidst the murmurs of those that surrounded him. He had been summoned, along with the others, to have an audience with the Emperor and while it was by no means an unusual request, there

was something about its timing that nagged at the *lanista* and an ominous feeling settled over his spirit.

Meanwhile, Tiberius sat mutely smiling upon his chair as his mind burned with blue and purple sparks and his thoughts hammered painfully against the sides of his head. The smile he bore was a trick to fool the spies that he knew were watching him, for he was anything but happy as over the last few days his eyes had begun to tell him lies and his blood in his veins betrayed him but at last he could see those before him for what they were. They were demons. Writhing, half-goat men sent from Lord of the Dead to frighten him. But Tiberius was a god-king who knew no fear and so they didn't make him afraid.

The night before he had spoken to the wind and the wind had told him that there was a viper among them. He knew. He could feel its venomous eyes staring at him from somewhere hidden in the room and soon he would flush it into the open and cut it off at the head. He would bathe in its blood and then his mind would stop burning and he could sleep again peacefully as he did before his mind caught fire.

"Decanus!" he spoke the single word aloud and the crowd of goat-demons stopped their horrendous bleating and fell into an immediate silence. "Bring forward the prisoner."

The squad leader, dressed in a ceremonial suit of silver and gold battle armor and wearing a helm that had a plume of vulture feathers sticking up from its side, appeared in front of the crowd, dragging the heavy and frightened figure of the advisor, Lucan, beside him.

"Ah, Advisor," Tiberius kept the smile on his face as his thoughts burned brighter and struck like lightning behind his temples. It took all of his concentration to speak his next words aloud, "How good it is to see you after you've had so late a night, sneaking around in the shadows." The Emperor grimaced slightly as the lightning struck again.

"My lord, I do not know what you mean!" the other man's jelly-like countenance shook with fright.

"Oh you know very well what I mean. The Eagles tell me," he eyed the silent guards on either side of his chair. "They tell me many things - like how you become a rat god at night, crawling on your belly through the palace's tunnels. You think I would not know that?"

Euric, who had been steadily staring at the back of the Decanus' head, now raised his gaze up to the Emperor's tortured face. He watched as the Emperor grimaced again and rubbed his right temple. It was a swift, subtle move that probably went unnoticed by most

in the room. Then, as Tiberius then stood up from his throne, again Euric picked up a slight waver.

Outside of the small aberrant movements, the Emperor's face remained placid, "My dear Advisor, what is it that the rat god would take from me? My throne?"

"No, Your Highness! I-I am your most fervent supporter! Your most loyal subject! I would no sooner betray you than I would my own blood!"

"I don't believe you. You sent my Legate away because you know he would protect his Emperor." Lucan's face went pale, which was enough of a confirmation for Tiberius. "See? Your whiskered nose twitches at your own lies. Maybe I should cut your tail off and wear it as a belt."

In reply, Lucan could only stand within the Decanus' firm grasp and continue to shake.

"Tell me, Advisor, would you like to know what the gods taste like?"

His panicked face clouded with confusion, "I don't und-"

"They taste like nectar. Did you know that? Honey and nectar." The Emperor stepped down from his throne and placed his face before Lucan's. He turned his own head from one side to the other, as a dog would upon seeing something it couldn't understand. "You see, I have eaten stronger gods than you, my little rat." Tiberius stepped back and nodded to the Decanus who immediately ran Lucan through the chest with his dagger.

Euric's eyes widened as he watched the body of a man that he had known for many years fall to the floor.

The Emperor grinned triumphantly over Lucan's body and raised his hands to the crowd, "Now see, I have appeased you demons by killing the rat god. Praise me, my people!" He raised his hands higher and closed his eyes, as if soaking in the roar of a crowd even as only a silent one stood before him.

The uneasy court members stared at one another in stunned bewilderment, unsure of what to do - until someone began to clap, quietly. Other court members quickly joined in the action, afraid of what might happen if they didn't and soon the applause and cheers that existed solely in the Emperor's fractured mind became reality.

"Yes," Tiberius mouthed in ecstasy amidst their accolades, encouraging them to keep up the applause with gestures of his hands in the air. He then opened his eyes and looked back towards his young son, "Spurius!"

"Yes, father," the boy stepped forward, calm and unmoved by neither the strange actions of his father, the crowd nor the execution that had occurred right before him.

"Join me, my boy!" Tiberius reached out his hand and as his son grasped it, he raised it high in the air along with his own. "Can't you hear them? They love us, my son. We are their kings. We are their *gods!*"

The *lanista*, seeing that most of the people around him were distracted, slipped out of the *curia* unnoticed.

Timonus and the *venefica* he now knew as Hannah had set out that morning from the caves at a steady pace. The weather seemed to clear up a bit as they continued their trek up the path to Feronia, although the gray skies above them remained. Timonus, who had awoken in an optimistic mood despite the previous day's hardship, breathed in deeply as he listened to the waves crashing against the rocks below them, "You know, the smell of the land is so different here. I'm enjoying it as the city can be a bit, well, *putrid* at times."

The *venefica*, walking a few steps behind the Legate, nodded in response to his comment but remained silent as her mind was on other things.

Timonus continued speaking, the girl's silence going unnoticed by him, "You know, I've heard that Feronia has the most amazing hand-raised freshwater mullet farms. I've wanted to try them for years but have never seemed to be able to get around to it."

"Have you?" she spoke at last. "Seems an odd thing to want."

"Yes," he laughed. "I suppose it does but when you reach my age, you start to want things that once seemed odd."

"Oh? What other things have you desired?" Her voice sounded far away but the Legate continued to take no notice, reveling in his own uncommonly good spirits.

"Well," he looked upwards as he thought of an answer to her question, "mostly the things that I've missed in my previous military tours. Things like fine foods, perfumes, oils... art that I never really appreciated when I was a young soldier. I've been all over the known world, I've been to places that others only dream of, but I never took the time to explore them properly because in my mind - well," he laughed slightly, "battle and fighting were the only things *in* my mind at the time." He smiled a bit sadly, "I suppose that's one regret I have."

"Regret? Do-do you have any others?" the *venefica* asked apprehensively, her thin fingers nervously playing at the sides of her long, black dress.

"Yes," he laughed deeply, "like most men my age, I have many."

"I-I suppose we *all* do, really."

"Ah, my dear," he cast a glance back towards the young girl, "you are not yet old enough to have regret."

She stared at the ground, watching her feet plodding along the path as they continued to make their way along the cliffside, "But you forget, Legate, I have lived more life in my short years than most have lived in their entire lives."

"Aye...," he said, nodding quietly in agreement. "I'll give you that, I will give you that."

They continued on in silence for a bit longer until she asked, "So, how do you... *live* with your regrets?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you have them, how do you get rid of them?"

"Hmmm," he narrowed his eyes as he pondered the question, "I don't think you do ever get rid of them, not really. All you can do is just try not to make the same choices again, but the regret is always there... rearing its ugly head." He smiled again, "Sometimes when you least expect it."

She was staring at him, unblinkingly, "I have learned that it is better in life to build up a resistance to such feelings, to treat them the same way that I've learned to tolerate poisons and venoms. You just... become numb, on the inside."

Timonus paused his steps, "Hannah, that's never a good way for a young lady to be--"

She grew slightly agitated with his constant references to her youth, "Then, tell me, how do *you* live with lives you've taken?"

"Well, I," he shook his head, "I am a soldier--"

"And you've never killed anyone innocent? Hurt anyone you regret?"

"Well, maybe--"

"Then how do you handle that?"

"I," he looked away momentarily, then back at her, "try not to think of such things."

She nodded slowly, "Because becoming numb to pain is how you survive. It's how *you* became such a brave soldier and attained the highest rank in the land."

"Listen, child, you've misunderstood me--"

"No, I understand you quite well and," her words became slightly more acidic as her temper rose at being called a child again, "I'm envious, in a way. I wish I could dispose of the innocent, cast them aside and feel nothing as you do."

Timonus grabbed her arm, "Listen, I don't know where you've suddenly gotten this idea about me but wherever it's come from, it's not true--"

"Then, tell me, Legate, what of your sons? What ages are they?"

His eyes narrowed again, this time in anger, "What do they have to do with anything?"

"Exactly! You left them, I'm sure, at very young ages! And for what? So you could go around the world and live out your little fantasy of being a hero, when all you were really doing was shivering impudently in the snow or visiting the palace brothels!"

Timonus face flushed red as he grit his teeth, "There are men who have suffered gravely for saying a lot less to me."

"And what would you do to me? Kill me? Would I be a regret to you then? Or would you just not think about me as you do the others?"

He let go of her arm and turned away, walking a few steps ahead as he took several deep breaths to calm himself down. It had been many years since anyone had been brave enough to address him so carelessly; insubordination and questioning of authority had no place in the military and therefore, had no place in his life, either.

Where had her sudden lashing out at him come from? The day before, when he had first met her, she seemed so confident that she could play her sorceress games with him but after their close brush with death against the Giants, her facade had become more and more cracked. Even as she stood upon the path with all of her paint washed away in the rain, she appeared to Timonus to be nothing more than an insecure, frightened young girl.

For the next hour and a half, each lost in their own thoughts, they walked in silence until the sun was in its high noon position and the clouds had begun to thin out a bit. As it did, their passage took on another incline and the jagged rocks that had lined their path grew larger and smoother and they were able to see more green grass growing up from the ground.

Timonus' anger had only slightly abated as he barked over his shoulder towards Hannah, "We should stop and eat something soon to keep up our strength for the rest of the journey."

"Yes," she spoke reluctantly, "...I suppose we should. I do have some left over rabbit."

"Enough for us both?"

She nodded, "It's not a lot but it's enough to keep us going. I didn't expect we would need it so soon." She pulled out a few of the pieces she had wrapped in the dried mushroom strips and gave him some.

"Thank you," he said awkwardly as he took it from her.

They paused before one of the larger boulders on the side of the path and ate their meal, discarding the bones along the ground.

Timonus cleared his throat after a moment as he looked out over the horizon, "I would never harm you, by the way."

"I'm sorry?" The statement had taken her by genuine surprise.

"You... you asked earlier, if I'd make you suffer, turn you into a regret. No, no I wouldn't. I admit I was suspicious of you yesterday, when I first arrived at the Caves but... listen, Hannah," he looked at her, "I wasn't lying when I said that I admired you. I really do wish I could have been as half as resilient as you when I was your age."

The *venefica's* face changed and she looked as if she were about to cry, "Please don't say such things to me."

Timonus looked at her strangely, "What do you mean?"

"It's just that... I'm not really used to praise of any sort. The *veneficas* do not progress with praise, you see and-"

He nodded, "Ah, I'm sorry then. I understand." He laughed, "My wife tells me the opposite for our sons, that I don't praise them enough."

She finished her portion of the leftover rabbit, "When did you meet your wife? If-if you don't mind me asking."

"No, I don't mind. I guess it was almost two decades ago. Hard to believe," he looked wistful.

"What district do you come from?"

He shrugged, "I currently live in the Palace, though my family live in the Margarite District."

"Is that where you're from?"

"Oh no," Timonus chuckled, "I come from a town called Caninia originally, in the North of Lycania. It wasn't until I joined the legionaries that I ever came to Odalia - and even then I lived in the barracks in the Palace."

"Did you ever visit the Ala District?"

He stepped away from the boulder, giving her a look, "That is something a gentleman never speaks of."

"I think you've forgotten that I'm quite acquainted with what goes on there."

"Maybe but I don't feel comfortable discussing it with you. We need to move forward."

She nodded.

A few moments later, he asked as they began to walk again, "What will you do in Feronia?"

"I, uhm, I have tests that I can use to evaluate for root blight and such."

"Oh? That must be fascinating. You know," he looked back at her, "I've always thought that the *veneficas* were all about sorcery and superstition but you seem to have a pretty grounded view of the world around you."

She smiled, "I try to. I've always been curious about how things work." But, as they approached another incline, this one steeper, with large mounds of grassy earth on either side, her smile suddenly disappeared. "Legate?"

"Yes?"

"I-I think we should stop here. Let's just rest for awhile."

"Why? Are you ill?"

"No, it's just-"

He laughed, "We're making great time, let's just keep going."

Timonus turned away and began to walk forward again but she reached out and grasped his arm, her voice full of alarm, "No! Don't!"

"What-"

"Let's turn back!"

"Why?"

"I-I know another way-"

"Another w-? Are you mad?"

"No, it's just-"

"*Halt*, travelers!"

Timonus turned at the sound of a new voice in his ears and saw a young man twirling a dagger in his hand and pacing at the top of the incline. It was as if he had suddenly and mysteriously appeared before them without so much as a whisper, from out of the very air itself.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, '*Halt*.'" The young man was dressed in a light-colored linen shirt, red vest and tan breeches with simple brown leather boots.

The Legate placed his hand on top of his sword and stepped protectively in front of the *venefica*. "I don't know what your intentions are, boy, but you should know we are on official business of the Emperor. Let us go peacefully and you will not be harmed."

The young man laughed with disbelief, "Harmed? Really?" He put his fingers to his lips and gave a short whistle. As he did, several other young men and women, dressed similarly as he, stood up from the surrounding rocks, all armed with bows and arrows that were notched and ready to fire at a moment's notice. "As you can see, I don't think I'll be harmed much whether I let you go or not."

Timonus face grew grim, "Alright, what do you want, then? Money? Jewels? I've neither."

"No, Legate. What we want," the young man lifted his dagger and pointed it in his direction, "is *you*."

Timonus drew his sword as the stranger began to walk towards them.

"No, stop!" the *venefica* stepped in front of the Legate.

The young man glared, "Move aside, *Moriana*."

"No. I agreed to lead him here but I did *not* agree to him being harmed."

He leaned into her and spoke softly, "I'm not going to harm him, only mess him up a bit."

"*No*, Julian."

Timonus looked from one to the other, a confused expression upon his face, "What's going on here? Tell me what this is about!"

"We are members of the Lupa Faction," the young man bowed. "A group of rebels I guess you could say, from the Ala District that are tired of your Emperor murdering innocent people and treating us like scum. A lot of us have lost loved ones to his tyranny and we're determined to see an end to his reign."

"That has little to do with me, boy, the Emperor makes his own laws."

"Ah, but *you* enforce them. So, your lovely accomplice here made a deal to turn you over to us - but she's late," he looked at her, "*very* late."

"We were attacked by the *Gigantes*."

The young man looked concerned for a moment, "And you survived?"

"Well, we... *hid*, but they took our horses and," she looked away a moment, "ate them."

A disgusted look crossed the young man's face, "Well, that explains why you're on foot. Camilla, get *Moriana* a horse please." His face softened, "I'm glad you're safe."

"Hannah?" The Legate finally spoke.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Legate. It has to be done."

"But *what* has to be done?"

"These people," she began to confess, "I've... sold you to them."

A long and lean young woman, seemingly of N'bari descent, led a horse to the *venefica* and presented her with a small leather bag that jingled as if it had coins in it.

Timonus stared at the transaction, stunned by what he saw, "What have you done, girl?"

She mounted the horse, "I'm sorry, Legate." Hannah stared at the ground beside him, unable to meet his eyes, "But, I told you, I am a survivor. I will do whatever it takes. Julian," she glanced at the young man, "see that he is not harmed and remember your promise to me." She turned and looked at last upon Timonus' face, "Goodbye, Legate. I told you, it is better to inure yourself to pain and... regret. I do hope you will not think to ill of me in the future for now I will only think warmly of you." Her gaze lingered on his face a moment before she turned the horse and galloped back down the same path that they had just arrived from.

"Legate," Julian addressed Timonus, "drop your sword."

"I will do no-"

Julian pushed his dagger against the hollow of Timonus' throat, "You must know that I break promises all the time and I won't hesitate to do it at this moment as well."

"I will *die* for my Emperor!"

"No," he shook his head, "you won't because your Emperor is a piece of cowardly worm dirt... as are you."

The expression that crossed Timonus' face showed a man struggling inside with his own mortality as well as his sense of duty and, perhaps most surprisingly of all, his own cowardice. In a burst of rage he threw down his sword and as it clanged against the ground, shouted, "*There!*"

Julian laughed heartily, "So, the lapdog shows his true colors. Cassius, pick up his sword. Phila, tie his hands."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Honestly?" Julian sheathed his dagger once he was sure Timonus' hands were tied. "I don't know, yet."

"So, the little *futatrix* sold me out for nothing."

"Ah, don't take it too hard. I've known that girl for most her life and she'd sell her own, well," he started laughing, "she'd sell *anything* as long as it kept her alive for one more day."

Timonus glowered and looked back over his shoulder but all he saw was a cloud of dust where Hannah had once been.

In his office, Euric looked over the faces of his most trusted men: Felix, Castor and T'tembo and declared, "Something dark is happening in this fair city, my men!"

Posides, meanwhile, silently stood to the side and filled his master's wine cup as Felix stated, "Sir, you've been saying that ever since you summoned us here."

Euric nodded to Posides and took the cup, nearly draining it almost immediately before continuing, "I know, Felix, I know, but it's because I don't know what to do. I don't *know* - I just," he placed his hands on his writing desk and then looked back up at them, "don't know." He took a deep breath, "Gentlemen, the Emperor is not a well man. His eyes... *gods*, if only you'd seen what I'd seen!" Euric began to pace, gesturing wildly with his hands as he did, "I can't explain it but *something* is wrong with him!"

The water pitcher within Posides' usually steady hands began to shake visibly, "How-how do you know?"

He stopped pacing, "He had his advisor killed, right there, in front of us all."

Posides gasped as Caster spoke frankly, "Sir, *lanista*, we are gladiators. Death is not-"

"This was different! This wasn't a man who had willfully chosen to enter the arena or-or a condemned criminal found guilty of a crime! This was an innocent man! Or," he shrugged, "he seemed innocent enough. I mean, I've known the man for many years and, yes, he can be a little shifty as all political being are, but he's always seemed quite harmless." He drifted off into his thoughts, "The Emperor also referred to him as a 'rat god'."

They looked at one another.

Euric shook his head, trying to dislodge the gory scene he had earlier witnessed from his brain, "His eyes seemed so... *strange*. Like-like they were far away almost, seeing something otherworldly - something that wasn't there!"

Felix shifted his weight from one leg to the other, "What can we do, then? What if there *are* supernatural forces at work here. We can't fight-"

Euric raised an eyebrow, "I have lived too long in this world to believe in the supernatural. I do not know what is causing the Emperor's madness, but I do know that it's not going to get better anytime soon and in the meantime, we are going to need ideas, plans

- *schemes* - something!" He sighed and ran his hands over his face, "I can think of nothing! And I'm usually so *good* at this."

"Give us our freedom," T'tembo said at last.

"What? Your freedom?" the *lanista* laughed as he quaffed more of his wine, "I've told you time and again, you *are* free! Just... you know, not to leave or anything."

"Or have money, or land or-"

"But you have your life!" Euric set his cup down on the desk and grasped T'tembo heartily about his bare shoulders. "You're housed, fed, well taken care of-"

T'tembo's face was stern, "If you are correct in what you tell us, it will not be for very much longer."

"I... yes," he sighed again and dropped his arms. "Yes, you're right. Perhaps something *can* be arranged, then." He began to pace, speaking his thoughts aloud as he formulated their next move, "But first, we must decide what we must do. The main issue is that we are not an army. We cannot fight as one, our training is just not attuned for that sort of thing." He eyed the statue of the Adversary and reached out to touch the angelic stone wings, "We are individuals; we *fight* as individuals... but maybe we can use that to our advantage somehow."

"How so?" asked Castor.

"I need to work out the details but," the Vandal looked back at them, "if you truly want to be freemen, then the *munus* might just be the key to that freedom. I can't believe I'm saying this but gather the men," he looked at them levelly, "we have a rebellion to plan."

Tacitus was stacking firewood outside of his house when he heard a scream coming from the area of his brother's home across the village. He immediately dropped everything and ran, closing the distance between his and Severus' houses in record time. When he arrived, he found a panicked Severus and a weeping Nona.

"What's happened?"

"Aelia!!" Severus shouted. "She's missing!!"

"What? Are you sure?" Tacitus looked at his brother.

"We can't find her," his face was stark white and it was the first time that Tacitus had ever seen such a reaction in him.

"I'm-I'm sure she's here, just playing in the woods somewhere and has gotten sidetracked about the time-"

"She is not allowed to go into the woods alone." As the other villagers began to gather around, Severus shouted to them, "Has anyone seen my daughter?"

They shook their heads, asking one another about who had seen her last and where she might have gone.

"Please," Nona tried to speak through her sobs, "please, Tacitus, the night... it's coming. The goblins in the forest, they will get her!"

His voice soothing, he tried to calm her, "Don't fear, Nona. The goblins are a myth - I'm sure she was just playing and got a little carried away, that's all."

Severus swallowed, "We'll go now and look-"

Nona turned to Severus, "I'm going with you-"

He shook his head, adamantly, "No, Marcus needs you here. You must stay for him while Tacitus and I go look for her. Tacitus," he commanded his brother, "grab your horse and join me. Cinna, Lucius, will you search in the Eastern part of the forest? Caius and Tertius, will you take the West? And Decimus, the North?" Severus looked at his brother, "Meanwhile, we will search the South."

A few moments later, after the men were dispersed to their designated regions, Severus said goodbye to his wife. He and Tacitus, who was leading Bellona behind him, made their way through the Aulus Forest, each shouting Aelia's name as they did.

"Where would she have gone?" Tacitus asked.

"I don't know, she's rarely away from me or Nona."

"Did she say anything earlier?"

"No," he shook his head, his face a grave mask but his eyes full of terror.

It was the first time Tacitus had ever seen his brother show any sign of nervousness or fear and it worried him quite deeply.

Severus looked up through the canopy of trees above, "We must hurry. The sun is setting and it's going to be a chilled night."

"Don't worry," he placed a comforting hand on Severus' shoulder. "We *will* find her Brother. Here, take some of this, you're too tense right now and this will calm you down," Tacitus then handed Severus a bladder of his strongest Two-Crows Ale that he had hung from his neck.

"I'd rather not. I need my wits-"

"Brother, it's your wits that are making you so tense."

Severus stared at the flask in Tacitus' hands, then took it and downed a large mouthful. He wiped his chin, "Thank you, Brother."

He tried to give it back but Tacitus shook his head, "You keep that for now."

"It's strong."

"I experimented with a new recipe in order to help calm people that I sometimes must treat by cutting."

Severus took another large gulp and a pinkish glow already began to form in his cheek, "It's good."

"I'm glad. Now, let us go find Aelia."

They scoured the forest floor over the next half hour, looking for the minutest clue that might lead to the child's whereabouts but finding nothing nearby after awhile, they eventually decided to rest a moment beneath a large tree.

During the search, Severus had continued to nurse the ale and had nearly drunk all of it by the time the sun had begun to slip further down in the sky. "It will be night soon," he slurred slightly.

"I know," Tacitus nodded, "but we'll find her. Don't give up hope."

Severus shook his head, feeling slightly dizzy as he did, "We have to find her, Tacitus. I can't... my life... I-"

"Don't speak, Brother, you're drunk."

"I am," he nodded. "I really am. Where could she be?" He clumsily attempted to draw his sword from a sitting position, "I will ki...*kill* anyone that harms her!"

"Calm down, Brother. We don't know anything yet. There is no reason to get angry and who knows, maybe the others have already found her or she went home on her own."

Severus took another draught from the bladder, "I should've paid more attention to her today, but I was in a bad humor and wanted no one else around me."

"Why so?"

"Today... is the anniversary of our father's death."

Tacitus shoulders sagged as they could hear Bellona munching on tufts of grass nearby, "It is, isn't it."

They sat in silence for a moment, both of their thoughts torn between Aelia and their father.

Severus broke the silence, his voice sharp, "If you'd gone along with us that day, he may have lived."

The statement stung Tacitus slightly but he attributed it to his brother's current state, "Maybe but neither of us have ever had much time for 'what-ifs'."

Severus laughed derisively as he took another mouthful, "What ifs... *I* think about the 'what ifs' all the time. I just can't do a damned thing about them."

Tacitus grew nervous at his brother's harsher tones and was beginning to regret that he had ever passed him the ale bladder in the first place.

"For instance," Severus continued, his eyes growing bleary in the dwindling light, "What if-what if you had gone with us up against that Giant like you should've that night?"

Tacitus narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

"Or, even the night that Otho attacked? What if? What if you'd had a sword?"

Tacitus stomach churned with dread at the mention of the thief's name.

Severus kept talking, "What if you had gone with us?"

Tacitus stared out at the trees as he answered, "My wife and my daughter would still be dead."

The statement temporarily stunned his older brother, "Aye, this is true." He took another drink. "I'm sorry."

"Perhaps you should give that back to me, Severus. I only meant for you to have a little-"

He laughed louder, "Really? You would take something from *me*, Tacitus the *Cauda*?"

Tacitus face paled, then flushed, "That is... uncalled for, Brother... and needlessly cruel."

"*Cauda*," he shoved Tacitus in the chest. "It is not cruel. That is what you are. Father should have been more cruel with you."

"Severus," Tacitus warned his older brother, "you are going too far with your words."

"Am I, *Cauda*?" he shoved Tacitus again, this time harder. As his brother fell back, Severus sat up on his knees, his face flushing a bright crimson. He was angry and Tacitus wasn't entirely convinced it was only from the ale as he roared, "Maybe I haven't gone far enough with you! Maybe that has always been the problem!"

Tacitus stayed frozen in place, "Go ahead then, Brother. Say the things that must be said."

"Fine!" Severus pointed at himself as he shouted, "*I* stood in the Purification circle that night and took the lashes that should've been yours! I bore *your* shame! *Me!* I have the marks of *your* cowardice upon *my* back! And-and how did you thank me?" He sat back on his ankles and gave a defeated sigh, "By kissing my wife..."

Tacitus eyes opened wide with the revelation.

"Yes, I witnessed it! Of course I saw it.."

"Severus, I-"

Severus vainly attempted to punch Tacitus in the face but his swipe didn't connect and the overwrought drunken warrior fell forward, his face to the ground. He didn't stay down long, though, as he then raised his head and reached out to grab Tacitus by the legs, pulling himself up the rest of the way. The brothers then began to wrestle atop the leaf litter and over the next while as they rolled, grabbed and punched at one another, two decades of pent up bitterness between the two spilled out on the forest floor.

As Severus started showing signs of being short of breath, he felt a twinge in his back and released Tacitus, immediately, crying out, "I can't do it anymore, Brother, I can't... I can't fight you."

Tacitus, whose own breath was also coming in large gasps, reclined on his hands, "Me... neither. I yield."

Severus started to chuckle.

Tacitus, seeing his much-vaunted older brother flailing around like a turtle stuck upon its back, began to laugh as well.

"I'm old, Tacitus!" Severus shouted up to the evening sky above him. "I'm an old man! And now my back hurts..."

Tacitus shook his head, "No, not old, just... out of practice!"

He laughed even harder and covered his face with his hands, "I'm so sorry, Tacitus, gods, I'm so sorry. I meant nothing I said tonight, I'm just-"

"You're afraid," Tacitus said, his breath beginning to return to its normal rhythm. "You're afraid and you're not used to it, so it's making you angry."

He eyed his younger brother, "I don't give you enough credit. You are a thoughtful man, Tacitus, and there is no shame in that."

Tacitus stood, groaning as he did, and held out his forearm.

Severus took it, smiling, "I'm sorry-"

"No, don't apologize. I *am* a *Cauda* and," he looked away for a moment, then back, "and... I'm sorry for Nona."

"No, Tacitus. I know it is not an ideal situation between the two of you and... I'm sorry for that. If things could be different-"

He shook his head, "But they are not. For now, let us concentrate on more important thi- *wait!*"

"What?"

Tacitus spotted an object in the stirred up debris in front of them and ran towards it. He scooped it up, "Aelia's shoe!"

"Gods, that must mean she's nearby! Please, let her be nearby!"

They called out her name again and as they did, they began to feel tiny cold drops falling upon their faces.

"Not rain, not now! Gods, show us some mercy!" Severus spoke to the heavens.

"Aelia! If you're there, please come out! No one will be angry with you! I promise!"

The light mist falling on them was soon changed into heavy raindrops.

"Nonono, gods, no," Severus soon became frantic as he continuously flipped over stones and fallen trees like a man possessed. "What if she's gone down to the river?"

"Don't think such things, Brother, we'll find her! Aeliaaaaa!"

Thunder clapped overhead and lightning lit up the blackened sky and Tacitus' anger at the gods increased. The brothers continued their search as the weather worsened, going deeper and deeper into the forest, until at last Tacitus spotted an ashen white foot sticking out from the inside of a hollowed out log. "Oh gods, Severus! I think I've found her!"

The brothers ran to a small pale bundle glowing in the moonlight and found the little girl curled up half-inside the trunk of a large oak.

"Aelia?" Tacitus retrieved the shivering bundle and cradled it in his arms.

"Uncle?" she said, her voice so very weak and tiny.

"Yes, I am here and so is your father."

"Tacitus, give her to me!"

He put Aelia into the arms of his brother.

"Father, I'm cold and my body hurts," she started to cough.

"Oh my dear girl," he held her to his cheek, her skin freezing against his own, "you're alright now. Don't talk, we need to get you home."

"I'm sorry I ran away. Mother was mad at me for being in the Order -"

"Don't talk, Aelia, *please*."

"I'm tired."

"Then rest for now and we'll be back in the village in a moment."

Tacitus' face was marred with concern, "We need to get her back *now*, changed and in front of a fire. Take my horse and ride back to the village, Severus."

"But that will leave you here alone -"

"I will be fine. You know I don't believe there are truly goblins in this forest and I will be right behind you."

Severus stared at his brother a moment longer, "Thank you, Tacitus. You can never know the debt I owe you!" Then, holding Aelia tightly in one arm, he pulled himself atop of Bellona and, without further hesitation, took off for the village.

As he watched them ride away, Tacitus whispered, "Yes. Yes, I can, my Brother."

As night fell along the Eastern Shore, Hannah pushed her horse as hard as she could as she raced the path back to the Caves of the Veneficas - although she wasn't entirely sure of what she was going to do when she finally got there. The truth was, she didn't know much of anything anymore as the further she rode, the more her conscience began to bother her.

The Legate had done awful things to innocent people, she assured herself. He deserved whatever fate lay ahead for him but then she remembered the vision she had seen in her dreams of the Legate lying on a battlefield and her heart began to pound. Hannah slowed her horse down and gave out a cry of frustration as she looked over her shoulder and back down the road that she had just come from, "Damn you!"

Hannah gripped the horse's mane tighter as a surge of anger swelled within her. Timonus was supposed to be a monster, just like the Emperor was - but he had said such nice things to her and he hadn't even dared try to hurt her when they were alone.

She thought of Julian, who had always taken care of her - ever since that day he'd found her cowering from the lashes of a whip that the cereal seller had given her after she was caught robbing his stall. She was only about eight or so at the time and she was alone, her mother having just died the week before but Julian, older by four years, took her under his care. Even as they grew older and they were forced to work the streets of Ala, he made sure she was protected.

She brought the horse to a complete stop and cast another look backwards, towards the Lupa Faction's camp. *I should go back*, she thought, *I should go back and tell him I was wrong... and tell him who I really am*. She was about to do just that when, from out of nowhere, a large, smelly hand clamped onto her mouth from behind.

She attempted to scream as the giant hands dragged her from the horse but it was no use. Even if she had managed to scream, there was no one nearby to hear it.

Euric stood in the barracks, eyeing his gladiators as he gave them the speech he had been practicing all day, "Men, I have called you here together today for one reason," he paused. "There are those of you here that cry 'freedom.' Now, we may dispute the semantics of the word but the truth is, there are a great many of you that want out of the arena and out of your contracts. Well," his eyes fell on Juko who stood nearby, "I have an opportunity to present to you that may give you your chance."

Euric continued as they gave him their full attention, "Things in the Empire are not going well. As some of you may have heard, there have been riots in the Ala District. Now, I cannot predict the future but I fear a great change is about to descend upon Odalia and I admit that what I'm about to tell you, well, I have my own interest at heart. And that interest is, of course, staying alive but I will need all of you in order to do it and in return, I will free you from your contracts."

Juko scowled, "I am not here to fight for your Empire. I am here-"

"Revenge, yes, Juko, I know. I've taken that into account and it is a major part of our plan. In fact, I wish you to remain here while Felix and Castor take the others out to the practice arena to give them their roles, should they accept them." He nodded.

Felix barked, "Recruits, regroup on the dust, full attire."

The men streamed out of the barracks quickly, equal parts excited and apprehensive about what the future held.

When it was just Juko and the *lanista* remaining he asked Euric, "So now you will tell me the full story of my brother's death. That's why you've sent everyone away."

"Yes," Euric agreed reluctantly, sitting down upon the edge of one of the nearby beds. "I will now tell you the full story of the night of your brother's attempted escape." He took a deep breath before continuing, "That afternoon, I gave Suna my *Rudus* and, by all accounts, simply placing it in his hands should've been enough to render him a freeman in the eyes of the law but," he shook his head, "I was naive, *again*."

"I am surprised."

"Are you?" he laughed slightly. "I am a mere showman-"

"You are a huckster."

Euric bowed his head with a small smile, "I cannot dispute that but... I am not *malicious* and I always hope for good things. That must count for something?"

"Continue on, *lanista*."

He sighed again, "That night, your brother and his new wife tried to make their way out of the city but they were stopped at the gates. He did exactly as he should and showed the guard the *Rudus*, which should've allowed him safe passage but, for some reason, everything went wrong. One of the guards recognized Lady Catherine and from what I understand, they immediately seized Suna. I do believe they thought he was trying to kidnap her at first and in the midst of all the chaos, he shouted at her to flee. She took one of the guard's mounts was able to get away, despite her... quite *bulbous* state. She must've been a remarkable horsewoman to do that but," he shook his head, "either way she managed to escape. For all I know, she may even still be alive as I've heard rumors that she fled to a witch woman's hut on the Western Coast."

"And Suna?"

Euric's face was downcast, "They took him into custody right then and there and threw him into a prison cell. I will spare you the details of the hours of torture that followed afterwards but the next day, they returned him here, throwing him out onto the floor of the Amphitheater."

Juko bristled, "And you did *nothing*?"

"What could I do, Juko? Die alongside him? What would that have accomplished?"

Juko was slow to answer as the rage within him burned greatly, "We are very different men, Euric."

"I agree. I am... hardly a man at all, some would say, but that is who I am. I am not a hero. I achieved my freedman status through cunning and theatrics. That's what I am and I don't deny it. Would you deny your true nature?"

The N'bari remained silent.

Euric continued, "As he lay bleeding upon the dust, the Decanus and his ten set upon him. Suna fought bravely and had he not been tortured before hand, I think he would've killed them all. He certainly caused his fair share of casualties! I watched the whole thing unfold, under threat of my own life of course, from the Emperor's seat... and the last blow came from the Decanus himself."

Juko stared ahead, his stomach beginning to turn, "What was the final blow?"

"Stabbed through the heart." Euric turned his face away from Juko as the memories returned to him. His voice was low and quiet as he continued the tale, "When they were sure that he was... *gone*, they left the Amphitheater. I," he cleared his throat as the emotions began to overwhelm him, "took his body from the dust and carried it into the catacombs of

the Two-Brothers Temple from our connection beneath the arena. The High Priestess, who had only married them the week before, helped me clean and prepare his body."

"Is his body still there?"

He turned back to Juko nodded, "Yes, preserved in the Lycanian way."

The N'bari fighter's face was awashed in emotions as he silently stood in the middle of the barracks, slightly swaying.

Euric stood alongside him and placed his hand upon the young man's shoulder, "You want your revenge, son, then it is the Decanus from which it should be taken; the Decanus was the one that killed your brother."

Juko grit his teeth as he spoke, "Then I will take his life and when I am done I will take my brother's body back to my father."

Euric nodded in agreement, then added, "I know that you owe us nothing Juko, son of Mutebe, but... will you stand beside us in the coming days, if it means that you will have your revenge?" Euric held out his arm to him.

Juko grasped it, firmly, "Yes, I will stand with you, *lanista*."

Spurius hummed pleasantly to himself as his servants dressed and washed him for bed in a long tunic. They then brushed his hair and brought him a basket of fresh fruit and a jug of water for the night, which they set upon one of the small tables beside his canopied bed. He continued to hum as one of the servants picked him up and placed him amidst his silk bed linens and goose down pillows. When they were satisfied that he was comfortable, they left the room, leaving one small brazier to burn throughout the night.

When the boy was sure that all the servants were gone, he lifted his small voice to the wind that blew in from the open windows and asked, "Mother? Are you there?"

It was a few moments before he heard a reply in the form of a darkly husky utterance from somewhere in the room, "Yes, my son. Your Mother is always here, always watching over you." Then, a hand gnarled with age and tipped with blackened fingers, slipped from between the gauze like material that hung from the bed's canopy and rested upon the boy's head but despite its appearance of a talon, it was gentle upon his crown.

"I am glad you have found me, Mother." He yawned as sleep tugged at him. "Never leave me again. Do you give your promise?"

"Oh, my boy," the voice rasped within the walls, "this Mother never abandons her children. Now sleep and dream of the days yet to come."

Chapter Five

Three days had passed since Aelia had safely returned home and Tacitus was at his brother's house checking on her as he had done everyday. But, as the little girl enthusiastically greeted her Uncle with a leap from a nearby tabletop into his arms, he soon discovered that any lingering concerns he had over her health were completely unfounded.

"Ooof!" he grimaced as he caught her. "Well, my dear girl, you appear to be quite healthy indeed!"

She grinned, the little white speck of her brand new tooth just beginning to poke through her gums, "Mother says I can join the Order now!"

Tacitus looked over Aelia's head and smiled slightly at Nona. She nodded as she spoke, "Yes, but only *good* girls can do that and right now *you* need to stop jumping off of things." Nona then stole a quick peek into Marcus' basket, relieved to see that he was still sleeping quite soundly despite his sister's exuberant aerobatics.

"Uncle?" Aelia asked, ignoring her mother's scolding.

"Yes, my dear?"

"What is that?" she pointed to the bit of scarred flesh that she could see peeking out from beneath the unlaced collar of his linen shirt.

"Aelia!" Nona exclaimed. "Don't be so rude!"

Tacitus paled for a moment, then recovered, "No, no, it-it's alright. It's nothing, I just.. I got hurt a long time ago."

"But you're all better now?"

He nodded slightly, smiling, "Yes, I'm all better now."

"Good! Put me down. I want to go play!" Tacitus chuckled as he set her down upon the floor and she disappeared into the back of the house.

Nona sighed, "I just don't know what to do with her sometimes!"

He glanced at her, watching as she mended shirts from the basket beside her. He thought she was beautiful, the way her hair fell into her eyes as she worked. "Well," he spoke, "I'm glad that she recovered so quickly at least."

"Me too," she smiled. "Although I'm sure your stew had a lot to do with it."

He shrugged, "Maybe, but I find that when it comes to certain illnesses, children are *very* resilient." Tacitus then reached down and picked up the medical bag he had brought with him, "I'm afraid that I have something important to take care of at home. Will you tell Severus that I think every-"

"Tacitus," Nona spoke matter-of-factly, her face showing a deep concern, "there is something you aren't telling me, isn't there?"

His eyebrows knit together as he laughed when he said, "Where did you get an idea like that?" He smiled to reassure her, "No, no, no - I just have a lot to tend to with the coming winter. In fact, I have a new brew that I'm working on that may help a lot of the village's recent stomach issues."

She searched his face, not believing anything he said for a second, "Are you sure? I know that the Ways say that women should not be privy to the concerns of men but you would tell me if something were wrong here in the village?"

He nodded, "Yes, absolutely!"

"Alright... I suppose." She was unconvinced.

"Listen, for now I want you to keep your eye on Aelia and tell me if anything - a slight snuffle, a cough, a sneeze - *anything* happens. Alright?"

"Of course." Nona walked Tacitus to the door and as she opened it for him, said, "Thank you again, Tacitus, for bringing my daughter home."

"But it was Severus-"

"No," she smiled and shook her head. "He told me how *you* were the one that found her and... thank you."

"Yes, well," Tacitus said, slightly embarrassed. "He-he's a good man, Nona. A good honorable man." He wished her goodbye, then turned and walked into the direction of own home.

As he did, he took a deep breath in order to steel himself, mentally cursing Nona's uncanny ability to read the slightest change in his demeanor. She had indeed been correct in her concern that there was something he wasn't telling her and it *was* something very dark and very worrying.

Tacitus entered his home and nodded to the group of men from the village that were already gathered around his dinner table, Severus among them.

"How's Aelia?" his brother inquired from where he stood looking down at a map that had been placed on top of the table.

"She's grand."

"Good, good." Severus continued to scan the old map, which was beginning to show signs of wear. "Now, Tacitus, come over here and show us exactly where you saw the remnants of the Giants' camp the other night."

Tacitus looked over their shoulders and pointed to the area of the forest that was on the right side of the map, "Here, I think. It was dark and very difficult to know my exact whereabouts that night."

"But you're sure it was Giants?"

"Absolutely, no question."

"And the campsite? How fresh did it seem?"

"Not very, maybe two weeks. There was rotting food and bones all around."

The men of the village looked at one another, a sense of dread filling the room.

Cinna, a short and squat man with a beard in the style of the Hairy Men asked, "But why are they back in our part of the forest? You and your father drove them out of here decades ago!"

"We did," Severus nodded.

"You even killed one of them, right?"

"That I did but it was no easy feat and I was in my prime. I don't know if such an act could be repeated. They are ruthless bloodthirsty creatures who seem more like animals than men!"

"Does this mean that we will have to fight them again?" asked another at the table.

"I hope not but I think it is too soon to begin speculating their plans. I feel we should watch and see what their movements are in the coming days. Tacitus?"

"Yes?"

"How many would you say that you saw evidence of?"

"Hm," he tried to recall the scene that he had stumbled upon that night three days before as he had walked back to the village alone, "I'd say... thirty, maybe forty? It was a large camp, with a mass of horse hooves and wheel ruts left in the soil."

Severus shook his head, "But they *never* used to travel in packs larger than ten! There must be a reason, but what could it be?" His mind formed a million different possibilities, "Maybe it's a new Thrax directing them."

"Thrax?" asked the one called Decimus.

"It's what they call their leader and one of the few words I ever understood from them."

"If that's true," Decimus asked the Giant-Killer, "then what do we do?"

"We send a runner to each village and request an immediate audience tonight with all of the Elders." He shook his head as he looked at them, "I don't know what the reappearance of Giant's means but I do know nothing good can come from it."

The Lupa Faction's transient camp was spread out over a disorganized patch that was comprised of both the stony outcroppings of the cliffside area and the overgrown green fields that led into the sparse forest of East Odalia. Julian clambered over the rocky ground as the new day dawned and threw a piece of hardtack at the Legate's head in an attempt to wake him up. Unbeknownst to him, though, Timonus had been awake since well before dawn as old military habits died hard. The Legate grasped the hardtack in his hands as he struggled to sit up in the restraints that were tied across his wrists.

For the last three days, the members of Lupa Faction had left him cold, hungry and dirty. As per Julian's orders, they had stripped him of his armor as well as his sword, leaving him only in his tunic and sandals, which were not much protection against the nighttime chill. In addition to his lamentable state, Timonus was also in desperate need of a shave and his wrists were red and raw where the ropes had been constantly chaffing at him.

He was also unsure of their location as Julian had insisted that they periodically double back and go in different directions so as to purposely keep Timonus confused. Little did Julian know that the experienced Legate had begun leaving markers on various stones within the camp and at night watched the stars so that he soon had a vague idea of what direction they were moving in. Despite Julian's misdirection, Timonus knew that they were traveling west, towards Odalia.

"Eat that," Julian pointed at the hardtack in Timonus' hands.

The Legate held it awkwardly, "How? I'll break my teeth!"

Julian took a ravenous bite of his own portion and spoke with a full mouth, "Yeah, well, I grew up on it just fine and I still have most of my teeth! Besides, you'll starve if you don't."

Timonus *was* quite hungry, having only been given small amounts of millet mixed with water to eat over the last few days. He tentatively tried to bite into the hard biscuit but only managed to chew off a corner, which sucked up all of the saliva in his mouth and yet, still refused to soften.

Julian sat down beside him, "So, I bet you wonder where we're going, huh?"

He shrugged, "Does it matter?"

"Yes! I mean, you want to know what our plan is, right?"

Timonus sighed, exhausted, "Julian, I've been in this camp long enough to know that you don't *have* a plan. You told me as much in the beginning."

"Yes, but what if I told you that just to confuse you?"

The Legate eyed him snidely, "Trust me, boy, you're not that smart."

Julian scowled as he stood back up, "What do you know anyway?" He walked a little ways away from the camp to relieve himself, though he remained in shouting distance.

"I'll tell you what I know," Timonus called out to him over his shoulder. "I know that this so called 'Lupa Faction' is a farce! You talk like you're going to rush into the Palace, bows drawn and take it over."

"So?" Julian called back, "what's wrong with that?"

"The Palace is home to a military the size of a small village. You won't make it past the gates, let alone into the Emperor's chambers."

"He's right, Julian," the N'bari girl named Camilla joined them and, after getting comfortable across from the Legate, began to sharpen a small pile of arrowheads that were resting in her lap.

Julian returned, sitting beside Timonus again, "Then what are *your* grand ideas?"

She didn't look up from her task as she answered, "I don't have ideas. I just shoot the things that people pay me to shoot."

Timonus chuckled, which irked Julian, who spat out at him, "Fine. Then what about you, old man? What would *you* do?"

"Well, I wouldn't attack the Palace."

Julian looked at him matter-of-factly, "I *have* to. I started this group to rebel against the Emperor. If I don't attack the Palace, how will we be considered any kind of threat to the Empire?"

"You're a group of degenerate kids from the poorest district in Odalia. You can't defeat an Emperor. He is a man like no other in existence, with more power than you can imagine."

"Why do you still defend him? How can you when you know he is a murderous tyrant?"

The Legate's face grew grim, "Because I know a very different man from the one that you see now." He leaned back against the rock, glancing up at the sky, "You have to understand, he wasn't always like this."

"But he is now and we can't let it keep happening! He's murdered fifty-two men and women in the last month alone - simply for the worship of 'false' gods and blasphemy

against the Twin Brothers! These were gods that we have been worshipping since we were born! The same gods *he* was brought up on!"

Timonus nodded, "I know." He knew because he had personally signed the death certificates for each one of the fifty-two.

"And now he's killing people for who they choose to love or marry? Tell me that isn't a man you still wish to serve!"

He looked at Julian, "I... I'm not really sure."

"Pff, can you believe this man?" he asked Camilla.

She shrugged as she set the arrowheads to the side and began to restring her bow, "Yes, but the Emperor is not just his commander, remember. He is also his friend."

"Aye," Timonus nodded. "Or at least he was."

"Well," she looked at him, "then I guess you have to ask yourself if what he is doing to your people is worth keeping that friendship?"

Julian declared, "Exactly! How long will you accept his tyranny? At what point do you walk away? When he starts slaughtering babies?"

Timonus looked at him in alarm, "He wouldn't dare-" but he couldn't even finish his own sentence because the truth was he no longer knew *what* Tiberius would or wouldn't do. No one did.

Camilla continued, speaking wryly to Julian, "Now, if I was the thinking type, I would say that the Legate here would make a much better ally than a prisoner."

Julian looked at her, hesitant, "You... would say that, would you?"

She continued to pull the string tighter, "If I was the thinking type, I would, yes."

He looked back at Timonus, "Well? How about it, then? Will join us, Legate?"

"Join you?" Timonus asked disbelievingly.

Julian attempted to make his case, "We've been out here for months, with no clear idea of what we should do. *You* could be the man that leads us to our destiny!"

Timonus thought the idea over. It seemed so far-fetched, so unlikely but as he looked around over the scattered members of the Lupa Faction he wondered if maybe the Mother Wolf had indeed answered his prayer after all. Maybe leading the Lupa Faction against the Emperor was what he needed to do to right the wrongs of the last few months.

The Legate started to nod, slowly at first, "Yes. Yes, Julian, I *will* join the Lupa Faction."

Julian jumped up immediately and began to run back into the direction of his bedroll, "I'll go get your sword!"

"Wait, Julian! You could've untied me first!" Timonus called after him.

Camilla plucked at the string on her bow then, satisfied with its tension, she took a small dagger from her belt and cut away the ropes that were on Timonus' wrists. "He's resourceful, that one, but he's not very smart."

"What about you?"

She shrugged, "There are some people around here that would say I think *too* much." She smiled at the Legate as she put away her knife.

"No!" Euric angrily rose to his feet from his seat within the Emperor's box in the arena. "You're still not doing it right, you filth!"

Juko, sweating in the midday sun, held out his hand to his teammate, Kai, who lay on his back in the dust of the arena. The Golden Man took it with his free hand and nodded, saying in a broken accent, "Thank you." In his other hand he held a spear.

Juko looked up to Euric in the stands and shouted, "What's wrong?"

"You're not convincing! What about to you, Felix? What does it look like from over there?" He shouted at the trainer who was standing at ground level against the back of the arena.

"I think Kai needs to hit the ground harder."

Euric then gripped Posides, who was standing beside him holding on to his ubiquitous sun umbrella, and pushed him a little ways over from the royal box. "You stand there," he barked and then shouted back down to Juko, "do you see where I have Posides standing?"

"Yes."

"*That* is where the Decanus will be! If there is any doubt of the authenticity of this fight, this man, the Centurion beside him and the Legate beside *him* will see it. And those are not the men we want to be able to see through our little ruse!"

Juko stared up at the Emperor's seats and, picturing the Decanus standing where Posides was, took Kai's spear from out of his hand and launched it into the stands. It landed just a hair's breadth from Euric's servant, bouncing uselessly off of the seats.

Posides face went pale as Euric laughed deep and loud, "My boy, if you can manage to do that before anyone suspects anything, the Decanus won't know what hit him!"

"Though I sincerely hope that he does," Juko brooded.

"Well, once you *do* manage to do that, the entire arena will be thrown into chaos. We will have, at most, mere minutes to get down below into the catacombs where the High Priestess will be waiting for us." He addressed the rest of the gladiators out on the field, "Once Juko and Kai take to the dust the rest of you had better be well enough away with your freedman papers in hand. I might can guarantee your freedom but I will not be able to guarantee your safety." The *lanista* then looked gravely upon the figure of Juko, "Son, I hope this is what you wanted."

The N'bari fighter nodded stoically and Euric muttered, "Then gods help us all..."

As night fell, the entire membership of the Cavalli's Elder Council met around a large fire that was lit within the middle of the village of Two-Crows. Severus stood before them and looked upon many of the faces that he had fought beside in years past. He addressed them, "Gentlemen, I have called you here to tell you that something ominous looms upon the horizon. We have recently had a report that the Giants have reappeared within our borders." He paused, giving them a moment to grasp what he had just told them before continuing, "But that is not the only reason I have called you, for I have also had reports from my scouts in the North. They tell me that something unsettling is happening in the capital of Lycania as well."

"What are we to do then, Giant-Killer?"

"I must admit," he paced as he spoke, "that I do not have the answers, which is why I've called us all together. I am asking for any aid that your village can spare but I do not know which course to take. I do not know if we should go to the Eastern Shore to try to gather information about the Giants or if we should travel through the dangers of the Unclaimed Desert to Odalia and see what strange things are happening there."

"We cannot fight the Lycanians now!" cried a detractor from the Silver Leaf village. "Yes, once maybe, in our fathers' time when we numbered many - like the leaves on the trees. But now," he shook his head, "we are not even *half* that number."

"Aye," Severus agreed, his voice rising, "but we also cannot sit back and do nothing, for that is *not* the Cavalli way!"

The rest of the Elders shouted in agreement.

"For the Cavalli do not run!"

The shouts grew louder.

"The Cavalli are not cowards!"

The men jumped up from their seats and raised their voices as their patriotic fervor increased.

"*Enough of this!*" Nona's voice cut across the Elders' cheers of bravado as she entered from the shadows and joined her husband.

Severus turned, surprised to see her, "What are you doing here? Where are the children?"

She turned her back slightly to him so that he could see Marcus tied securely to her as Aelia's smiling face appeared from behind her legs, waving excitedly to her father. Nona boldly stepped forward, "If I may, I, too, wish to speak to the Council."

Vibius, the Elder from the Little Fish village, sneered at her, "Women are not allowed into these meetings. Severus, isn't this your wife? Control her so that we may continue!"

Her eyes narrowed at him as she hissed, "I have just as much right to be here as any of you! Is the Cavalli blood that flows in my veins any different than the blood that flows in yours?"

Vibius did not answer.

Aelia ran to her father and grasped him around the leg. Severus smiled down at her as he placed his hand protectively upon her back and motioned for her to be quiet.

Nona continued, looking from one Elder before her to another, "The Ways say I am not allowed here. But by what right do *you* claim that?"

They remained silent.

She continued, undaunted by their reticence, "Is it simply because I am a woman and nothing more? Is that why I am ordered away?"

"The Ways," one of the members of Five Bears began to speak, "state that you cannot comprehend the sacrifice that is required for the good of the Cavalli."

Her face flushed, "I dare any of you to claim that I, or *any* woman, have not sacrificed as much as you for our people!"

"Women do not go to war," another of them ventured. "A man does. A man must sacrifice his life for his people. What have you done that would equal such a thing?"

Her face grew stern as she answered the question with her own, "You wish to know what a Cavalli woman must sacrifice for her people?" She briefly cast a glance back at Severus before she began to speak, "A Cavalli woman must sacrifice her thoughts, so that she may concentrate on hearth and home. She must sacrifice her desires, so that she may

tend to those of her husband. She must sacrifice her body in order to breathe new life into the world."

Nona looked at the Council, "Tell me, is it not taught among our people that to be a true warrior of the Cavalli you must be brave in all things? Then, I ask you this: would any of you stand up now and say that *I* am a coward?" Nona began to walk down the line of Elders, looking at each one of them in the face as she spoke, "Do you wish to know of *my* stories? The ones that will never be passed down as yours will be? Do you truly wish to compare your bravery to mine? Fine! Then I will do just that!" Her green eyes flashed as she continued, "Tell me, then, my brave Cavalli brothers, have any of you given birth by yourself in the dark of the night? With no one but the Owl Mother to guide you and the Deer Woman to comfort you?" Her voice rose as she continued to demand of them, "Have any of you cradled a child that you pulled forth from your own body? A child that never had a chance to take its first breath and that was put away in a grave so tiny that digging it seemed almost a mockery to life itself?" Nona's voice faltered slightly as her gaze fell to the ground.

Severus remained stone-faced behind her even as his heart felt a twinge of sadness at a memory he thought long past, but still he did not stop her from speaking.

"Tell me, *men*," Nona looked back up at them, "now that you know *one* of my stories, am I not Cavalli just as much as you?"

An ancient Elder, who was older than everyone else present, stood up shakily from his seat at the end of the line - although his voice was clear when he spoke, "What would you do then? Carry a sword? Fight a Giant? Lead an army?"

"I would do what needs to be done, for the good of our people and the protection of our land."

Severus stepped up beside her, "She is right, my friends. For far too long we have overlooked the assets that we've had beside us all along. While our numbers may never equal those of the Lycanians, with women added to our ranks, we nearly double our fighting forces and increase our chances for success!"

"And what would you have *us* do, then?"

Nona looked around at the faces of the elders and realized that they were, for the first time in her life, truly listening to what she had to say. "I would," she cleared her throat, then took a deep breath and began again, "I would have you, and those women that wish to accompany you, track the Giants. They are gathering for a reason and the stronger and larger their packs grow, the less the Lycanian forces will matter to us in the end."

Severus nodded, then looked out among the others, "What say you, Elders? Do we arm the women and let them join us if they so wish?"

It was quiet at first, until one of them - a man who appeared slightly older than Severus, stood and spoke, "The Silver Leaf village respectfully withdraws its aid to the village of Two-Crows. We will make preparations on our own to defend our village in the case of an attack." He turned and left the Council.

"Little Fish also withdraws," Vibius stood and left.

"Big Oak does as well."

One by one, Elder-by-Elder, they each withdrew their positions until there remained only the eldest Elder still standing.

Severus stepped over to him, "Does Running Deer village withdraw as well, Elder Cato?"

"No, my son," the ancient's voice spoke. "The Running Deer will join you but I'm afraid I only have a few fighters of age, including myself and two horses."

"We accept your offer," Nona answered before Severus could speak, "though I feel your wisdom and courage would be much better served here with us in the village."

He smiled and the wrinkles on his face grew deeper as he did. He looked at Severus, "This one reminds me of my daughter. She was a good woman and she died fighting in the Desolate Wars many years ago."

Severus seemed surprised, as he had never remembered his father ever mentioning female fighters during the Desolate Wars.

The Elder saw Severus' confusion and chuckled, "Not all the men that fought beside your fathers were men beneath their war stains."

"Well, then we are very honored to have the fighters from Running Deer join our ranks, Elder Cato."

He bowed slightly, "I will immediately send a scout and you should have your fighters and horses in the morning."

Timonus stood dressed in his full military regalia atop a boulder before the members of the Lupa Faction. As the stars shone behind him, he looked rather imposing to the twenty or so youths that stared up at him expectantly. He eyed them back, all young men and women, none older than two decades. They were a sad group, he thought, underfed,

unwashed and unorganized but, the Legate reminded himself, he had led worse forces in his days.

"Our best time to march on Odalia," he began, "will be during the *munus*. The people will be distracted by the festivities and most of the military will be contained in the area of the Amphitheater, guarding the Emperor."

"And when will that be?" Julian asked.

"In three days time, which doesn't give us very long to prepare. Thankfully, most of you are damn good shots."

They smiled at one another, patting Camilla, on the back as they did.

"But," he cut them off, "being a good shot will only get you so far - especially since we do not march upon Odalia with the intention to kill anyone."

"How will that ever work?" Julian sounded disappointed.

"As far as anyone there knows, I am *still* the Legate of Lycania and while I may have turned against my Emperor, I did *not* turn against my country. I believe the men there will still answer to me and I do not want the Emperor harmed in any way. He is to be taken prisoner and given a trial. Lycania will then fall under military rule with my command until a proper Senate can be formed."

"What will happen to-"

"*Wait!*" A far off voice cried out from behind them. They turned to see that one of the lookouts who had been stationed towards the south was running towards them under the light of the full moon, waving his arms above him, "Wait! Hold everything!" He joined them a few moments later as his words came spilling out of his mouth in a breathless rush, "*Wehavetoleavenow!*"

Timonus stepped down from the boulder and went to him, "Slow down, boy! What is it that you're trying to say?"

"*Gigantes*," he gasped, "they're headed this way!"

Timonus felt a familiar sense of fear wash over him at the mention of the Giants, "Are you sure?"

He nodded, gasping, "I saw them in the distance... Hundreds of them! And based on the direction that they're going, I'd say they are heading to Odalia, which means they will cross this place soon. We need to move camp, *now!*"

"How far are they behind us, then?" Timonus inquired.

"A couple of hours, at most."

"Dammit!" he swore. "Then we need to leave and regroup in a more northern location, closer to the forest so that we stay upwind." He turned to address the group again. "Everyone, grab up your supplies-"

"Wait - there's one more thing," the lookout said, panting as he was still trying to catch his breath.

"Yes?"

"The have that *venefica* girl with them."

"Please let me go!" Hannah yelled out at the top of her lungs from behind the wooden bars of the rolling cage in which she had been placed. The Giant foot soldier that walked alongside the cage growled at her and banged on the bars. She jumped back as he gave a guttural laugh.

Frightened, she crawled back into the corner of the cage and wrapped her arms around her knees as she looked around at the mess of fetid wet straw that surrounded her. As she did, she tried not to ponder the fate of the two Golden Men that she had seen in the cage during her and the Legate's first encounter with the Giants. Hannah rested her head on her knees as the cage continued to rattle on and wondered if maybe she was just getting what she deserved for betraying the Legate over to Julian.

The Giants' caravan lumbered to a stop a short while later. She looked around but wasn't sure of exactly where they were. In truth, she hadn't been sure of their location since after they left the cliffside path, for she was unfamiliar with much of the territory outside of the Caves of the *Veneficas*. She did know that she could see the lights of the White Palace glowing in the West after the sun had set and could also tell that they were steadily traveling closer to it.

The Giant foot soldier flung open the cage door and grabbed Hannah roughly by her hair as he dragged her out. She tried to scratch at his flesh but his skin was too thick and her nails useless against it. "Let go!" she shouted.

He did just as she said and dropped her onto the grassy ground. She landed on her elbow, crying out as she injured it slightly. The Giant then leaned over and barked at her in his unknown language.

"I don't know!" she shouted back, her fear and pain making her lash out.

Frustrated, he let out a huge roar right in her face and as he did his breath reached her nostrils immediately, smelling of rotting meat and decay. In a reflexive move, she grabbed a small packet of powder from inside the bodice of her dress and threw it into the Giant's eyes. As he began to howl and claw at his face, Hannah decided to make a run for it but was caught by the Giant's leader before she could even gain her footing.

He picked her up and slammed her slight body against the cage, his large hand restraining her across the abdomen as he said something to her.

"I don't know what you're saying!" she shouted back. "I can't understand you!"

"Wa... ter," he croaked. "Where wa...ter?"

"Water? I-I don't know! I've never been here before!"

He growled, bearing his teeth at her.

But Hannah's fear was beginning to get the better of her and she started to cry. "I don't know, please, just let me go!"

He shook his head and pointed towards the west. "No. Go there. To Mother."

"No, no, see my mother is dead, she doesn't live in Odalia. I don't want to go back there. Please, let me go!"

"Mother *there*."

"No, she isn't. I swear! But my-my father is an important man in the Lycanian military! Let me go and I'll tell him to reward you!"

"No. *Mother*."

She began to weep. "Please..."

The Giant Leader grew weary of the girl's pleadings and angrily tossed her back into the cage. Once back inside, Hannah curled into a ball and wept.

Juko sat on his bed, staring at the floor in thought. T'tembo watched him from his own bed until he could stay silent no more, "I am... afraid, my friend."

He looked up at the undefeated champion with a surprised look on his face.

T'tembo continued, "What if things don't go according to plan?"

"Whatever happens three days from now *will* be the plan."

His wide face relaxed, "I wish I could be as confident as you."

Juko smiled slightly, "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course."

"What will you do with your freedom?"

He grinned broadly, "I hope to go to the North. I want to buy land and become a farmer."

Then, for the first time since he'd arrived in Lycania, Juko laughed. It started as a small chuckle and then progressively grew into a large guffaw that wracked his entire body as he pictured the large man before him sowing a field in a farming tunic. "A farmer?"

T'tembo began to laugh, too, until they both laughed so hard that tears streamed down their faces. Eventually, Juko stopped to catch his breath and T'tembo took the chance to ask him the same question.

His eyes saddened slightly, "I will not leave here with my freedom and, in all probability, I will not leave here with my life."

"But your father?"

He shook his head, "He will never know. It is better for him to think that his two sons are living a carefree life in the Lycanian capital together than it will be for the reality." He nodded as if convincing himself, "It is better this way."

"Your brother was a good fighter. The crowd loved him and he loved the crowd."

"He was happy here, wasn't he?"

"He was," T'tembo nodded, "very much."

Juko smiled solemnly, "I am glad to know that at least."

Back on the Eastern Shore, Timonus, Julian and Camilla crawled along the ground until they found a grouping of large stones they could hide behind as they spied on the Giants' caravan. The rest of Lupa Faction's members had headed northwestwards a few hours before, leaving the three of them behind in order to wait upon the arrival of the Giants to see if they were actually holding Hannah.

"I hope she's alright," Julian spoke in a loud whisper, trying to spot her within the cart that rested in the middle of the caravan.

"I'm sure she's fine," Timonus whispered back, flatly.

"You shouldn't be angry with her."

"Of course I should! She sold me to you!"

"Yes, but she had her reasons!"

Camilla shushed them, "Please, men, if you continue on like this then they'll hear us for sure."

Julian blanched slightly, "Sorry!"

They observed the Giants for a little while longer, noting that while most lay asleep on the ground there were four posted lookouts patrolling the camp's perimeter.

Timonus leaned into to Camilla, "I think these must be the same Giants that we saw the other day on the road to Feronia."

She watched, "What could they possibly be doing? And why have they left her alive?"

"Can you see her?" Julian asked excitedly.

"Yes, she's in the cage. But why is she alive? *Gigantes* never take prisoners."

Timonus shook his head, "Something is brewing on the horizon but I cannot, for the life of me, figure out what it is. And why would they be going to Odalia, of all places?"

"Perhaps their own form of rebellion?"

"They are nomadic in nature. What use would they have with a city?"

"I suppose that is true. I know very little of them for we do not have anything like their kind in Noba."

"I don't know much about them either, honestly. Up until the other day, the only thing I knew of them were the stories that my men had brought back from their patrols. Wait," Timonus turned around and looked for Julian who had gone uncharacteristically quiet. Not seeing him in the immediate vicinity, he asked Camilla where he was.

She groaned, "I don't know."

Suddenly, they heard the sounds of large stones being thrown into the direction of the caravan from deep in the shadows to their left.

"What is he doing?" Timonus whispered to her.

She laughed slightly as a smirk crossed her lips, "My god, look! He's distracting the guards!"

Julian, banking on the low intelligence but high distractibility of the Giants, had perched himself atop one of the large boulders that surrounded the area and was tossing rocks into the long grass around the caravan, just out of sight. While the sound of the stones hitting the ground wasn't enough to wake the sleeping Giants, it was enough to cause the guards to start searching for the origin of the sounds, which lead them away from the cage where they held Hannah.

Meanwhile, Camilla and Timonus eased forward, staying low in the shadows as they crossed the grass into the Giant's caravan. Timonus mind flashed back to a few days before

and just how close that had come to being the Giant's next meal. He took a deep breath and held it as he stepped over the sleeping form of one of Giants. Then, all of the sudden, he froze, his fear becoming nearly unbearable until he realized that Camilla had already reached the door of the cage-cart. She appeared to be having difficulties as she struggled with pulling the wooden stake out from the locking mechanism that kept the cage door closed.

In the cage, Hannah's eyes widened when she saw what Camilla was trying to do and she crawled over to help as best she could but try as they might, neither could loosen the wedge. Timonus gritted his teeth and forced himself closer so that he was able to reach up and wrench it with all of his might, dislodging the wood and opening the cage.

As the Legate helped Hannah down from the cart, she opened her mouth to say something to him but he shook his head, stopping her as he grabbed her by the arm and the three of them began to run from the Giant's camp. But upon finding nothing out of the ordinary, the guards had returned as well and spotted the three of them just as they disappeared into the shadows in the direction of the forest of Odalia.

As they ran, one of the guards lifted his head high in the air and howled at the top of his lungs in a call-to-arms that awoke the other Giants almost immediately. The sound sent ice down into the souls of Timonus, Hannah and Camilla as they ran, passing Julian along the way. He joined them as they continued to run through the slightly rocky terrain, which soon became grass. They then ran through the grass until it became forest, all the while feeling the diseased breath of the Giants upon their necks.

Only, the Giants, they soon discovered, weren't actually following them.

For had they been able to look behind them, they would have seen that, once awoken, the Giant's leader had stopped his guards from pursuing the escaped prisoner and her rescuers. He instead chided the guards, pointing in the direction of Odalia and in his gruff language told them that arriving in the capital city by the next day was far more important than pursuing anything else.

As the sun rose over Two-Crows, seven men, two women and four horses prepared for their journey out of the Aulus Forest and on to wherever the trail of the Giants would lead them.

Severus gathered his daughter into his arms, telling her that it was her responsibility to keep her mother and brother safe. The little girl dutifully kissed him on the cheek and said she would. Severus then looked at his wife and infant son, stating in his most pragmatic tone, "I know you will be fine."

"Yes, my husband, for we have rusty swords and old men to protect us," she laughed wryly, though her comment wasn't entirely said in jest.

"Yes," he nodded. "Perhaps a forge is needed in the Order first before a set of barracks are built."

"Perhaps. But, those are thoughts for another time." She smiled, though it was slightly distant, "Be well, my husband. I know *you* will be safe."

He gave her slight bow and then after handing Aelia back to her, hoisted himself onto a black gelding that was on loan from the Running Deer village.

A few steps away, an anxious Tacitus was unsuccessfully attempting to tie his medical bag to the back of a just-as-nervous Bellona. "Whoa, girl," he said as he tried to steady her, but failed as she stepped away from him once again with a neigh and a snort in his direction.

"Here," Nona laughed as wrapped the wayward strap through a loop on the horse's saddle.

"She's not used to saddles," Tacitus said, sheepishly. "And neither am I for that matter."

"She will do alright, Tacitus, but you," she breathed deeply, trying not to let any of the private ache of her heart be known publicly, "*please* stay by your brother. Just promise me that you will."

He nodded, glancing towards Severus, "I will. Of that you can be sure."

She embraced him in a quick fleeting movement, then stepped back as she called out to them all, "Goodbye, my fellow Cavalli warriors! May the gods grant you a safe journey and quick return!"

They finished saying goodbye and those of the party that were riding climbed onto their mounts, while those that were walking hoisted their bags onto their backs as the small force of nine set out for the Aulus Forest's easternmost edge.

As they left the village, Severus' heart soared as if it had been cut free from some invisible restraint. It had been far too long since he had felt such an excitement within his bones and as they rode on, a few of the older Cavalli started up the war songs of old. Severus

closed his eyes and joined in and as their voices lifted to Heaven above, he knew that his people would one day rise again into a great nation.

As Tacitus watched Severus' back, he thought of the first time that the threat of the Giants had arisen - nearly two decades previous, when he was both still a father and a husband.

He smiled as he thought of his wife, Valeria. She was very different from Nona, with black hair and dark eyes and a gentle, submissive spirit. She had also possessed a lovely singing voice and it was that voice that had driven Tacitus to her while he was foraging for medicinal herbs. He'd come upon her dancing and serenading the trees while seemingly lost in her own private world but as soon as she discovered him watching her, she became very embarrassed and stopped. Tacitus begged her to continue, telling her it was the sweetest sound he had ever heard upon his ears.

Their young love blossomed quickly and the wedding soon after had been a gorgeous affair - held in the springtime near the river. Neither had quite reached their second decade but Cavalli often married young in order to increase the chances of fertility. She looked so beautiful that day as she stood waiting for him patiently while his brothers carried him up to the altar upon their shoulders in the Cavalli tradition.

The entire village of Two-Crows had come out to watch and celebrate with them. He had never seen so many people gathered but was pleased when he saw that his father stood proudly beside her father and their mothers wept upon each other's shoulders. It was the second happiest day of Tacitus' life and he thought life would never be any different than it was in that moment, surrounded by people that knew and loved him so well. For ten years life seemed impossibly blissful, until rumors of Giant sightings began to crop up.

The rumors had persisted for so long that most of the Cavalli, including his father, believed that the Giants were a myth, much like the forest goblins. Growing weary of what he saw as nothing more than scaremongering among the villagers, Atticus put together a scouting party in order to investigate the validity of the claims.

It was expected, of course, that all men of the village would join him but Tacitus, reluctant to leave his wife and young daughter, couldn't bring himself to join them. He saw no benefit for his family should he be killed or wounded but knew that participation in the hunting party was expected of him. He agonized over his dilemma before finally deciding to go to his father with his concerns.

His father surprisingly understood and even gave him a way to get out of going without losing honor. Atticus told the rest of the village that he had heard that a sickness

had arisen in the children of Little Fish and that they would need Tacitus' expertise in Two-Crows should the illness arise in their own children. Though most people in the village accepted this excuse, it was the beginning of the wedge that would eventually come between him and his brothers. And, when his father was then mortally wounded during the hunting party, the wedge grew even larger.

It was a fortnight later when his brothers returned to the village, their father being dragged behind them upon a litter. He had been wounded in his side by one of the Giants' bladed weapons and the wound had become infected. He was barely conscious by the time they had made it back to Two-Crows but still he refused Tacitus treatments, even the ones he was offered for pain.

Then, as his father lay dying, Atticus called each one of his sons to his side individually and gave them their final words. When it was Tacitus' turn, he spoke gently to him, "My son, do not blame yourself as the others have. Only the gods know what could have happened had things been different."

"But, Father, I could've saved you had-"

"You do not know that." He placed a weakened hand upon his son's head, "Listen to what I have to say, Tacitus: others in the world may not see what I see in you but I have seen something great. Your fear is not from cowardice, it's from a wise and cautious mind. The gods have blessed you with this. You must not waste it for it is a rare and precious thing to be granted a thinking brain."

"I feel there is no place for me in the Cavalli-"

"Ah, my son, but there is! Your time will come and you will see. In the meantime, I must ask you to watch over Severus. Watch over him, Tacitus, for he thinks too much about others and not enough of himself. Your mother will not always be around for him and he gets so solemn at times that I fear for his well-being. I know it may not seem like it now but he needs you, Tacitus."

Back in the forest of Aulus, around midday the party had reached its border. They decided as a group that they should dismount to feed and water the horses for the impending journey to the Eastern Shore but before they could, Vibius, along with a few other members of some of the surrounding villages, appeared before them - some on foot, some on horseback, all armed.

Severus' hand moved instinctively to his sword, though he left it in its sheath. "What do you want with us Vibius? We mean no harm."

The other larger man sat upon a black stallion, warily eyeing the two women in Severus' group. "So, you're hunting Giants with women... and a *Cauda*."

Tacitus lowered his eyes slightly as his heart began to pound within his chest.

Severus glowered, "We aren't hunting them, as well you know. What do you want with us?"

Vibius shrugged and tightened the grip that he had on his horse's reins, "It's simple, really: We're here, Giant-Killer, to *join* you." His face relaxed into a smile as the rest of Severus' party breathed a sigh of relief.

"What made you change your mind?"

"I thought about it a little while longer and ultimately, your wife was right - though I did not care for her tactics. But we *are* all Cavalli and we must stand together or we won't stand at all." He leaned over to Tacitus and held out his forearm, "Isn't that right, my Brother?"

Tacitus gave a relieved smile as he nodded, "Yes, Brother," and gripped Vibius' forearm firmly in return.

Then, after a brief respite, the new *larger* group of Cavalli warriors rode out of the forest and onto the path that ran along Eastern shore. As they rode, they began swapping old war stories and sang more songs until Severus saw something shimmering in the horizon. "What is that?"

As they drew closer, Tacitus felt a sinking feeling begin in the pit of his stomach, "Oh no..."

Everyone turned to look at him.

He sighed and answered, "That's the Unclaimed Desert."

Cries of disbelief came from the others, "It can't be! Not out here!"

Severus shook his head, "Not this far out! You can't tell me its spread this far!"

Tacitus was gutted as he nodded, "I'm afraid it has. That is no doubt that that is the sand and white hills of the Unclaimed Desert."

In a moment of disbelief, Severus kicked his heels into his horse and spurred the gelding on towards the horizon until the grass below him became sparse and sandy. He looked down and saw that Tacitus had been right, the Desert had spread since he had last been upon the land.

He climbed down from his horse and knelt down, running his hand over the sand, "I can't believe it."

Tacitus and the others arrived behind him.

Severus looked over his shoulder, "It... it is as you say, Tacitus. The desert has spread."

No one spoke for a while as they gazed upon the devastation that was before them.

Severus then addressed the group as he stood, dusting his hands off, "No one will think less of you if you decide now to turn back and return home. We did not come equipped to travel in the wasteland-"

"Are *you* going to go on?" Decimus asked.

"Aye," he nodded. "We first fought the Giants about a thousand meters from here, when it was still the remnants of our former grassland home. I believe that if we want to get any ideas on what it is they're planning then we need to start there."

"We will stay with you, Giant-Killer, wherever you lead."

"Aye," Vibius agreed. "For the good of the Cavalli!"

The rest of the party raised their arms into the air and shouted in agreement.

Severus looked at Tacitus, who nodded, "Yes, Giant-Killer, we will *all* follow wherever you lead."

Chapter Six

The day of the *munus* had arrived and Odalia's white walls shone like the sun that bore down upon the spectators lining the seats of the Amphitheater. Nearly twenty thousand people from every district in the capital filled the stands and such a wave of excitement roared through them that no outsider would ever suspect that any rumors of civil unrest could ever be true.

The day had begun with all of the pomp and circumstance that the White Palace could muster, beginning with a parade led from the Palace steps by the Emperor Tiberius himself riding upon a resplendent chariot. Following his chariot was a mass of beasts, exotic wildlife and performers the likes of which the Empire had never seen: hippopotamuses and ostriches from Southern Noba, trained monkeys and bears with strange black and white markings from the Land of the Golden Men and giant, horned ox-like beasts from the furthest reaches of the Hairy Men's tundra. Rounding out the parade at the end were the crowd's favorites, the gladiators, dressed in their full armor as Euric, Felix and Castor led them in the processional.

As Juko plodded along beside Kai, T'tembo and the others, he could think of no other time in his life when he had felt more uncomfortable than he did right then, dressed head to toe in colorful plumage and scale-like armor. The bright color patterns of the dyed feathers that lined his costume armor were offensive to his eyes and had surely been created in the imagination of someone who had never even seen the N'bari traditional dress. But still, the crowds gasped as he walked by, their gasps soon evolving into riotous cheers and applause as they began to shout out, "Kabaakia! Kabaakia! Kabaakia!" A bastardized version of the N'bari word for 'Chieftain,' that was the name that Euric had given him as part of the backstory he had secretly spread around the capital.

When the parade had at last arrived in the Amphitheater, the wealthy citizens of Odalia entered the structure first and took their seats upon the lowest tier of the stands, followed by the less wealthy citizens and the next until, at the very top stood the poorest of all Lycania's citizens. Most of the lowest class attendees were from the Ala District and had been enticed to attend the *munus* by both the free seating and the promise of free bread loaves to be handed out later - a state-sponsored charity rite that was frequently performed to appease the gods.

The Emperor and his son, flanked by the Centurion and the Decanus and surrounded by his special guard, arrived in the royal seating box that was located in the center front of

the stands. In the box, Tiberius remained standing as a pageboy appeared beside him and presented the Emperor with a laurel wreath resting upon a pillow. He then took the wreath and cast it into the dust of the arena and as it landed, the crowd cried out a huge cheer and the *munus* was officially opened. Tiberius then took his seat and motioned for the Orator to begin.

The Orator nodded and took his place below the Emperor's box, which allowed him to be heard throughout the entire Amphitheater. He welcomed everyone as he ushered in the opening ceremonies. "Greetings, citizens of Lycania! Welcome to the Emperor's *Munus*!" The crowd cheered madly as Tiberius covered his eyes and flinched from the headache that had been steadily growing all morning.

The Orator continued, "This *munus* is quite a special one as it honors the death of a very important man!" He flung his hand into the direction of the large double doors on the floor of the right side of the arena from where all things entered the Amphitheater. As the doors opened, a line of musicians entered playing a ceremonious tune while following them were a trio of slaves, each carrying a pike in their hands. Resting upon each pike were the heads of Lord Heron, his wife and their adolescent son, Antonius, and upon the sight of them, the residents of the Ala District that lined the uppermost seats shouted and screamed, horrified by the scene before them.

The Orator ignored them and continued speaking, "Join me, citizens of Lycania, in giving our respects to Lord Heron and his family!" The lower tiers began to laugh as the upper tiers grew angrier and shouted down at them.

"Let this be a lesson," the Orator continued, "do not betray your Emperor!"

The slaves then placed the pikes into the ground around the arena so that they would be on display during the entire *munus*. Once they had finished their task, they exited and the animal trainers entered with their display of unusual animals. Spurius sat on the edge of his seat and excitedly pointed out to everyone nearby the ostriches, bears, zebras and leopards that jumped and leapt around to the songs of the musicians. After the performing animals were finished, next came the dancers - a group of young men and women who depicted in an uninhibited naked dance the ancient story of the birth of the Two Brothers.

As the noon hour drew near, the Orator announced the next act on the schedule, "Citizens of Lycania, before you take up your midday meal upon the grounds, I implore you to wait a bit longer in your seats as we witness the perfect justice of the Emperor unfold before our eyes!"

The gates opened again and the Emperor's guards were seen shoving an unwilling group of men and women into the arena. They were dressed in the gray tunics that denoted them as criminals and their hands and feet chained.

"Here, my friends, are the latest traitors to have had the audacity to break the Emperor's gods-given laws! Look at them in their shame!" he pointed at the condemned as they huddled together in the center. "Eight men and four women. All who have flaunted their arrogance to our beloved Emperor! What were their crimes, you ask? Why the worship of the Sun God, the War God and the Ancient God! Stare upon their arrogance and be wise, Lycanians! For they have rebuked the Two Brothers! But, will their gods save them now?" He laughed heartily, "If not then may the Two Brothers shower them with their omnipresent mercy and give them quick and easy deaths!"

The cage doors were opened and four male lions were let loose upon the frightened prisoners. Half of them attempted to flee by running up to the sides of the arena and jumping to see if they could reach the top edge of the walls. As they reached out their hands to those sitting above them, the wealthy citizenry of Lycania simply laughed them off, kicking away the hands of any that had actually managed to reach the edge. As the attendees in the higher seats watched this, they grew even angrier and demanded that the people pull them up but their protestations fell upon deaf ears.

Eventually, after only five of the unwilling participants had been mauled and eaten, the lions grew tired and, to everyone's amazement, simply lay down upon the ground with no more interest in the other humans huddling together in fear in the arena. Tiberius, himself weary of the monotony of watching the reclining lions, sent word to his guards to execute the remaining prisoners.

As the animal trainers led the lions out of the arena, the Orator announced, "Now we will have a small intermission. Enjoy your meals, Lycanians, for when this break is done, the gladiatorial will games begin! Starting with the debut of the arena's newest star: Kabaakia the N'bari warrior, whose family was murdered by those dastardly Bestials, the Golden Men! Today, my friends, will he get his revenge?"

Tiberius groaned and placed a hand to his head.

Spurius looked at his father, "Do you want me to get the *medicus*, Father?"

"No, no, my son. The gods are just speaking to me, that is all. But their voices," he grimaced, "they hurt my head at times."

Spurius went back to his gleeful enjoyment of the games as he looked up at the Decanus standing next to their seats, "I can't wait for Kabaakia! He's supposed to be amazing!"

"I have to admit, I, too, am looking forward to his performance as well. In fact, we still have plenty of time before the fight, would you like to go and meet him?" the Decanus asked, unapologetically seeking favor with the Emperor.

Spurius looked expectantly at his father, who shook his head behind his hand, "I would rather he didn't leave my side. There are many snakes about today."

"But that's not fair!" Spurius sat back roughly, glowering as he kicked at the cement balustrade before him.

"Ah, my son," Tiberius smiled wanly, "one day you will understand - when you rule after I am gone from this world, you will see that there are always snakes beneath your feet."

Still Spurius sat there and still he glowered.

Despite the pain that roared through his head, Tiberius hated to see his son upset and so asked, "Would you like to hold my sword?"

As expected, the young prince brightened almost instantly, "Could I?"

"Yes, my son, of course. It will be yours one day as well."

He carefully removed the sword and its sheath from around his waist and handed it to the boy.

Spurius stared at it with delight as he looked upon its silver and jeweled sheath. He then pulled the sword out slightly, turning it so that the sun glinted off of the double-tempered Icanthian steel.

"The Sword of Irae," Tiberius spoke with pride. "Taken by our bloodline after the defeat of Thera."

The Decanus spoke up, "Your Highness, if you don't mind, I would wish to go down to the *hypogeum* myself and examine these gladiators before the fights begin. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yes, yes," he impatiently waved him away as he massaged his temples, "but watch for serpents."

"Of course," he bowed and excused himself, nodding to the guard that led him to one of the many secret entrances to at least a hundred different tunnels that existed underground. Once safely down below, he wound his way through the tunnel that would lead him to the gladiators' waiting room. As he rounded the corner, he came upon the

lanista, who was busy speaking with a rather sizable group of highborn women that were begging to be granted entrance into the gladiators' room.

"I'm sorry, ladies, while I'm sure the men would appreciate your company, they must concentrate their energies for the afternoon's activities. If you would like, you are welcome to come and watch any of our practices during the week." Seeing the Decanus, Euric ushered them away quickly.

"Uh, hello, Decanus. What brings you down to these flea-infested haunts?"

"*Lanista*, I wish to see these new recruits of yours. I'm curious about my chances of making any of my money back in today's wagers," he laughed.

Euric masked his anxiety with a hearty laugh in reply, "Absolutely, Decanus. Why don't you follow me?" He held his hand out and he and the Decanus stepped into the large room where the waiting gladiators were either standing or sat upon benches, nervously anticipating the upcoming events.

"You know," the Decanus remarked, "I've always been fascinated by all things gladiatorial."

"I think most men are."

"I have to admit, I have often wondered how I would fare in such a contest myself."

"Oh, Decanus," Euric fawned, "you would be unmatched, I'm sure!"

He looked at him coolly, "Yes, well your ability to flatter is unmatched... I'm sure."

Juko, clad in his feathers and scales, stiffened as they entered the room seeking out T'tembo first.

Euric held out his hand, "This is our *palus primus*."

"Yes, I'm familiar with this one." He looked the large gladiator up and down, as if he were examining an animal that he wanted to buy at the market. "He's undefeated, which makes him not as valuable now on the betting circuit as he once was. A sure thing, really."

Euric showed him a few others of the gladiatorial specimens, including Kai.

"A spear?" The Decanus inquired, taking the weapon into his own hands.

"A *Golden Man's* spear. Much different in design to our own as you can see, much more equipped for close distances."

He nodded, admiring the leaf shaped arrowhead and bright red tassel that hung from its top. He returned the spear to Kai and then moved on to Juko. His face brightened, "Ah yes! Our new star! I'm very interested in seeing this one fight. How will he fare against the spear, do you think?"

Euric grew nervous, "Well, he is quite a remarkable fighter. I believe he has a good chance."

"Good. I've put quite a lot on him."

The Decanus seemed uninterested in pursuing any more information about Juko and moved on. Then, after viewing the rest of the gladiators he was ready to return to his seat, saying as he shook the Euric's hand, "Good-looking group you have."

"You should come down one day to our training sessions."

"I would like that, *lanista*."

Euric bowed and the Decanus turned to leave but just before he did, he turned around and asked, "Oh, how would you join like to join us in the Emperor's box during this next fight? As you know, it's a fabulous view."

He started to sweat, "Oh, yes, I would be, uh, be honored, sir."

The Decanus nodded as he walked away and disappeared down into the tunnel.

Hours after their near miss with the Giants while procuring Hanna's rescue, Timonus and the members of the Lupa Faction arrived at the edge of the sparse forest of Odalia, positioning themselves so close to the White Palace that they could actually see its eastern walls from where they stood. But despite their apparent readiness, Timonus was making them wait - though he had yet to give them a reason.

Timonus was at a mental crossroads as he stared up at the white walls. There was something in him, a fear of some kind, preventing him from moving forward but he couldn't identify it.

Camilla walked away from the group and joined him in staring up at the wall, "Legate, I must say, I do not envy your position."

He nodded slightly, "Right now, neither do I."

"While I would never make it a point to question your judgment, I do wonder what it is that we are waiting for?"

He inhaled deeply, "I'm not sure, Camilla. I feel... uneasy but I'm not sure about what."

Her voice sounded slightly apprehensive as she asked, "The lookouts say the *Gigantes* are closing the gap between us. Are you not concerned for your men? Shouldn't we warn them?"

He looked upon the ground, "Yes, though I know that the minute we step foot into Odalia the life that I've known for nearly three decades will be over." He looked over at her, "I'm also asking a lot of you and the others. Almost certainly we will lose lives today but is it worth it?"

"Well, Legate, that is our choice to make - not yours." She looked at him thoughtfully, "But I think that is not the only thing that bothers you."

Timonus looked at her curiously as she continued, "I think it is the fear of what will become of your friend, the Emperor."

He nodded but said nothing.

"He must have been a great man to have you still supporting him. What was he like before?"

"Well," Timonus began, "it's hard to say. He was always arrogant... spoiled, entitled but never needlessly cruel. If anything, he seemed apathetic and unconcerned towards any affairs of state." He looked at her, "That's the thing that I do not understand. These laws and these ideas in his head are recent manifestations!"

She shrugged and said off-handedly, "Maybe he is ill?"

He looked at her, slightly alarmed, "I... I never considered that a possibility. Do you think he could be?"

"Has anything else been odd with his behavior?"

"He complains of headaches, *constant* headaches - and stomach issues. He never sleeps anymore, either. Says he speaks with the Two Brothers all night long-"

"He's being poisoned," Hannah spoke up at last from behind them.

"What?" They both turned to face her.

She looked uncomfortable under their scrutiny as she and the Legate had not actually spoken since her rescue, "The Emperor, from what you've just said, the headaches, stomach cramps - he's being poisoned."

He eyed her warily, "Are you sure of this?"

She grew a bit bolder as she asked, insolently, "You would ask a *venefica* if she's sure that someone is being poisoned?"

"But, if this is true, is there anything that can be done? Can he be cured?"

She shook her head, "It all depends on what poison it is and at what stage."

He looked back at the wall, "Then I suppose we'll need to find out."

The Cavalli rested just south of the Caves of the *Veneficas*. The three-day journey through the desert had exhausted both them and their horses and, in addition, had nearly depleted their morale - for the trek so far had only raised more questions about the Giants than actually answered them. Severus reclined against one of the large black rocks that had begun to pepper the landscape around them and pondered all that they had seen so far upon their journey.

The first day in the desert wasteland had started out rather tame and as they rode, they were pleased to see that the other side of the desert appeared just a few meters away over the horizon. Soon, though, with every step they took that lead them nowhere closer, the Cavalli realized that what they were seeing was just the Sun God playing tricks upon their minds. Disappointed, their previous songs of merriment and tales of past triumphs fell silent.

As they rode through the arid land and looked out over the rolling dunes that surrounded them, Severus couldn't believe that what he saw had ever been lush with vegetation, despite the fact that he had witnessed it for himself just decades previous. But now as he gazed upon it, the ground was bare and cracked and the wind swirled bits of sand up into their eyes and as night fell, the temperature became almost unbearably cold as they struggled to sleep.

Then, as they set out for the next day already fatigued from lack of sleep, Severus soon became convinced that they were lost as hours had passed by with nothing but the same monotonous sand dunes to mark the landscape. But as the sun sunk into the afternoon sky, they caught sight of something faintly off in the distance. It looked like ragged strips of scarlet material blowing in the winds but it wasn't until they were nearly upon it that they could see that it was the remains of several tent-like structures, which had been strung together to form a kind of makeshift city. Bones, bleached by the sun, and turned over pots littered the area around it, leading them to believe that it had been abandoned very recently.

The Cavalli dismounted and began inspecting it, hoping to find any left over water to quench their thirst or food to sate their hunger. Disappointingly, the best they could find was a crude well that brought up dirty water and for food, they discovered all that was left were rotten carcasses of unknown origins littered about the place.

All was not lost, though, as the entire camp was surrounded by large hoof prints that continued on into the north. Severus was pleased to at last have a trail to follow and used

his sword to sift through the remains of a few of the campfires they had come across, "So, this is where the Giants have been all these years."

Tacitus shook his head, "No, I-I don't think they have. Because if so, then why would I have found one of their camps in our forest?"

Severus nodded, "Then what are *your* thoughts on this, Brother?"

Tacitus felt a rush of appreciation for being asked and gave his most honest answer, "I think they've been secretly scattered throughout the entire Eastern Shore all these years, in their original limited packs. I think *this* is where they have all recently converged and that's why there's a massive set of prints leading north."

"But why?" asked Decimus.

"That much, I don't know but we have to figure it out."

They mounted up and rode for another day, still following the mish-mash of prints that continued to lead them inexplicably northwards. As the journey went on, they became increasingly desperate and drank the dirty water they had gathered from the Giant's camp and ate whatever scorpions or lizards they could find. Their new diet had ill effects, including vomiting, which left most of the warriors dehydrated

But after surviving another harsh night, the exhausted Cavalli eventually emerged from the Unclaimed Desert and onto the Eastern Shore. In contrast to the sands they had left behind, the green coastal grass grew tall and blew in the cool wind that had come off of the waves that crashed loudly beside them. While they still lacked water, the stronger of the Cavalli set about capturing fish to eat in order to restore their strength.

Resting against the rock, Severus agonized over their fate. The Giants' prints and camp litter continued upon the shore road but he didn't know for how long and he wasn't sure they were safe being out in the open as they were. Plus, they would have to pass the Cave of the *Veneficas* soon and in all honesty he wasn't sure if they would interfere with his party or not. There wasn't necessarily any bad blood between the *veneficas* and the Cavalli but they often worked for the Empire and that could prove disastrous for Severus and his warriors.

"So, what do we do?" Tacitus inquired as he approached, having done his best to tend to the ill members of their party.

Severus sighed and stood, "We keep going. We now know that the Giants are here in Lycania, but we don't know exactly where nor do we know why?"

"Well, the trail looks as if it goes on for thousands of meters along the shore path. Do you think they could possibly be heading to Odalia?"

"Doubtful but I can't say for sure. Why would they?" He shook his head again, "I don't entirely understand it." He then looked at his brother and sought his advice again, "Tell me your thoughts, Tacitus. What have you been thinking?"

Tacitus heart thrilled again, "Well, I-I say we go to Odalia but we stay off the main path and instead go westwards through the hills."

Severus looked surprised, "Oh? That's an interesting path to take. Why would you do this?"

"It makes sense, if you think about it." He reached into the bag that he had slung across his chest and pulled out the map. He showed Severus as he pointed to the area towards Lycania's middle, "I think they're going to Odalia, Severus. There's no other reason to be here. This road is not a trade route. It wasn't even that often traveled when these were Cavalli lands.

"The main problem is that we don't know their current location and if we stay on this path, we could be walking straight into their camp and not even know it. But if we take the hills, we can spy on Odalia from a safe distance and give some of the more ill of our party time to rest. Plus, we can fill our bags with fresh water from the stream that's near there as well as find wild game to fill up on for the journey back home."

The Giant-Killer mulled over Tacitus' plan for a moment before eventually nodding, "Alright, that's what we'll do, then and if the Giants have any plans in Odalia, I guess we'll know soon enough what they are. Good work, Brother."

The crowd in the arena was cheering so loudly that Juko could feel the roar within his own chest as he walked out onto the dust and for one brief second, as he looked around the mass of people that rose up to the heavens, he felt that he could almost understand his brother's reasons for wanting to become a gladiator. He'd never seen so many people gathered in one spot but there they were, twenty thousand people standing on their feet and shouting his name - and he hadn't even made a single move yet.

Euric stood next to the Decanus in the Emperor's box and attempted to hide any nervousness he felt with his usual showman's flair, pointing out Juko and bragging, "He has to be the best fighter I have seen in my years of doing this! You will not be disappointed in this fight, Your Majesty!"

The Emperor frowned, "I hope he's awful. He looks like a buffoon out there in all those feathers. Besides, a Bestial fighting a Bestial, why should I care? Why should any Lycanian care? We put too much value on N'bari fighters, calling them 'exotic' when they are only nothings like the others. The gods tell me they will die soon, anyway."

Euric stayed hushed while his mind searched furiously for a way to escape.

The Orator below them announced Kai's entrance and as the Golden Man entered the arena, the crowds began to boo and hiss, throwing bits of food at him to emphasize their dislike of the novice gladiator. He looked anxiously at Juko, who nodded back, as if trying to mentally calm the man and reassure him that all would be well.

The gladiators were then ordered to take their positions and as they did, a priestess from the Temple of the Two Brothers, dressed from head to toe in a mass of white robes, appeared at the edge of the first tier. She cast a silken square out into the arena and when it landed in the dust, the gladiators began their grand charade.

Kai swiped at Juko with his spear and as the N'bari jumped back, the audience immediately cried out. They then began their carefully choreographed fight, jumping at one another while avoiding strikes at certain points then clashing at others until Juko pretended to take a stab to the leg - which caused the crowd to jump immediately from their seats. He limped and carried on, sending the crowd into such frenzy that they were leaning out over the edges of the arena walls and shouting both curses and encouragements at him.

Then, just as they had rehearsed, Juko gained control of Kai's spear and appeared to change the course of the fight. The crowd cheered frantically, feeling that their champion's triumph was near. Soon, after a few well-timed rolls and falls, Juko at last stood over Kai, the spear point at his throat.

The crowd cheered incessantly as the Orator asked, "Do you yield, Golden Man?"

Kai gave the thumbs up signal, shouting, "I yield! I yield!"

"Then, citizens of Lycania, cheer for your new champion of the arena -"

"Wait." Tiberius commanded.

The Orator turned around, slightly confused, "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"None of this 'I yield' filth. It should be to the death. I want it to the death. What's the point in this foolish nonsense if there's no blood?"

The Orator turned back to the crowd and announced, "I'm sorry, dear watchers, the Emperor himself now demands that the bout end in death!"

A raucous cheer went up from the crowd as they chanted, "Death, death, death!" over and over.

Juko's eyes grew wide as he looked down at Kai, whose breath came in short bursts while he had begun sweating profusely.

The crowd continued shouting, "Death, death, death!" all around them.

Kai closed his eyes and nodded but as Juko stared down at him lying there upon the dust, he hesitated. He had never killed a man nor had he ever had a desire to - save one. He looked back up into the stands at the Decanus.

The Emperor shouted, annoyed as his headache spiked behind his eyes, "What is taking so long? Do as your told or I will have you killed where you stand!"

Juko remained still, for even under threat of death himself he felt he could not unjustly kill another man. Instead, he threw down the spear and pulled Kai up from the dust.

The crowd booed and in a fit of anger, Tiberius stood up from his seat and ordered the guards to seize the N'bari.

Euric, in a moment of panic, leaned over to the Emperor, "Eh, wait, Your Highness, I have an idea!"

Tiberius shut his eyes, his head becoming almost unbearable, "What is it, *lanista*?"

"Don't kill him just yet!"

"Make this fast, Vandal, or you will join him."

"Instead of just killing him, why not have this fool fight one of the great Lycanian Legionaries?"

"To what end?"

"To... to show Lycania's might over the Bestials of course!" He grabbed the Decanus and pulled him in closer, "In fact, the Decanus here was just telling me earlier about how he wished to test his mettle against such an opponent! He will clearly win, Your Majesty, as the might of the Lycanian forces is unbeatable due to the mercy and compassion of the Two Brothers, may they be praised. Besides, if the N'bari is going to die anyway-"

"Oh yes, Father!" Spurius applauded with glee. "I would so love to see the Decanus fight!"

Tiberius turned towards the stunned face of the Decanus and addressed him, "Alright then, it will be. Decanus, arm yourself and go put an end to this... whatever he is." He motioned for the Orator to announce the new fight.

The Decanus whispered to Euric as left the box, "You will pay for this, *lanista*. I will make sure of it!"

Euric shrugged sheepishly, "You have the gods on your side, you can't lose!"

As the new fight was announced, the crowd's electricity shifted. Those wealthy Lycanians who had just cheered for the victory of Juko now cheered for the Decanus, while the poorer citizens retained their loyalty to the N'bari warrior, seeing his possible win as a triumph over the tyranny that had made their lives so miserable in the last years.

The Decanus emerged into the arena, his familiar helm shining beneath the sun as the crowd jumped to its feet again. After Kai was safely away from the arena, Juko squared himself before the other man and stared into the ice-blue eyes of his brother's killer.

The Orator continued, "Cheer for your champion, Lycania! Choose your side! Bestial or Lycanian! Who will win? Although, I have a feeling that the certainty of this fight was written in the stars long ago!"

The Decanus said nothing as he pulled out his *gladius* and gripped its hilt.

The priestess was called upon again to drop another silken square and as it floated into the arena, the Decanus charged at Juko. He lifted his *gladius* into the air, prepared to end the fight in one strike but as he came nearer, Juko slammed an elbow into his face, breaking his nose.

The Decanus fell to the ground instantly as his eyes watered and his face filled with blood. He roared and held his nose as he stood. After he recovered briefly, he then charged at Juko again, this time swinging his blade wildly. Juko simply stared down his opponent and as he had with T'tembo once before, spun out of the way as he came near and threw himself upon the Decanus' back. The Decanus began to flail wildly as Juko wrapped his left arm around the man's neck and grabbed on to the bicep of his own right arm.

"Who are you?" the Decanus struggled to ask as his face began to turn scarlet and he fell to his knees.

Juko spoke into the Decanus' ear, "I am Juko, son of Mutebe, chieftain of the Grasshopper Clan and brother to Suna - an innocent man murdered by your own hand."

The Decanus tried to laugh as saliva sputtered from his lips, "That mongrel cried and wet himself at death!"

Juko couldn't help the rage that flowed through him at the other man's words, even as he knew he was lying. He pulled his arms free and then snapped the Decanus' neck in one swift move, killing him instantly.

Juko shoved his body into the dust and stood staring at it as the crowd sat in stunned silence.

Euric ran to the edge of the box seat, shouting, "Run, Juko, now! Get out!"

Upon hearing the *lanista's* voice, Juko seemed to wake from his stupor as he grabbed the Decanus' weapon and soon sped from the arena. Three guards set upon him as he ran but he was able to fight his way through and continue on, disappearing down one of the secret entrances before another group of guards found him.

Meanwhile, back in the arena, the crowds in the upper tiers were shouting and applauding with such exuberance that those on the bottom tiers had become afraid. In a panic, the wealthier classes along the bottom began to run towards the exits but as too many tried to leave at once, bystanders were pressed up against walls or thrown down onto the ground and trampled. The upper tiers then became so emboldened by the lower tiers' own folly that they began to climb down the stands and attack them in a furious rage.

All of Odalia became chaos.

Across the Amphitheater, in the Emperor's box the Centurion barked orders to the guards, commanding them to regain control of the people as he secured the Emperor away safely via an underground passageway, which led directly to the Palace. He then ordered that the *lanista* be arrested immediately but when he turned, Euric had already disappeared.

The Vandal had wisely run down his own secret entrance while everyone else's attention was on other events. Once down below, he had doubled back to the gladiator's waiting room, grabbing Posides as he did and was very thankful that the guards he passed along the way had not recognized him. He and Posides then headed for another secret entrance that would lead them to the catacombs and where they would hopefully meet up with Juko, which was part of the original plan. But, instead of finding Juko, they came across both T'tembo and Felix, neither of whom had left Odalia yet. A few feet later, they found Juko at last, his armor destroyed and his face covered in blood.

"Juko! What has happened, son?"

He shook his head, "It's not my blood. I was attacked by the guards."

"Where you followed?"

"No, I made sure of it."

They continued their descent into the underground, heading towards the catacombs of the Temple of the Two Brothers. As they came closer to it, Euric slowed down, breathless, "Wait, men - I need to catch my breath! I am not fit as I used to be." He gasped and sputtered leaning against the earthen walls for support, "Besides, these tunnels are unknown to anyone except the priestesses of the Temple and me, we are in no real danger at the moment."

As Euric rested, Juko looked upon T'tembo and Felix, "Why are you here? Why didn't you take your freedom?"

T'tembo spoke, "Because we were planning a rescue mission should you have been arrested."

Juko nodded as a smile touched his eyes, "Thank you, my friends." He then turned to Euric, "Where are we?"

Euric stood up from the wall, "The *hypogeum* of the Temple. Your brother's body is resting there, just under that arch that leads to the next room." He put his hand on Juko's shoulder, "Go on, son. We will be behind you."

Juko inhaled deeply as he walked ahead and entered into the next chamber. He looked up, amazed by the height of the underground ceilings, which were braced with elaborately carved arches. There were braziers hanging down before a dozen or so niches that had been dug into the walls and within each niche was a body, wrapped in muslin. All around them stood statues representing the once living as small piles of incense burned before them.

As the others entered, they saw a woman clad in the white robes of the priestesses of the Temple kneeling every few feet, bowing her head in benediction.

"High Priestess!" Euric shouted, shattering the silence of the sacred room. "I have brought Suna's brother to you!"

The woman finished her prayer, then arose and greeted Juko, "Hello, my son." Her voice was soft and comforting as she continued, "I am sorry that we must meet under such conditions. Follow me and I will bring you to your brother." She then led him to a body wrapped in muslin in the same manner as the others but laid out upon a nearby slab with fresh cut herbs around his body.

"He has been preserved in our traditions. I apologize if our ways have caused any offense to your gods."

He shook his head slowly, "No, High Priestess. You have done well and I am grateful."

He looked upon his brother's body and felt a deep sadness move within him that was so great that he thought he might collapse beneath its weight. For even wrapped as it was, Juko knew the body before him was Suna's. He was almost too long for the slab and his shoulders barely fit the width of the table. "My brother...," he said quietly.

Euric spoke softly, "Juko, if you would like us to leave you alone-"

"No." He said, then looked up at the others. "No, do not leave."

"What will you do, now? Take him back to your father?"

He shook his head again, "No. Now that I see him here, as he is, I know that I cannot face my father." He glanced at the High Priestess, "Can you get him back to Noba for me? I will pay."

She bowed, "I will see what can be done, my son. I have many connections here in Odalia but money is of no concern to me."

"Then please return him to my father - along with a letter detailing all that has happened." His eyes began to glisten, "Tell him of Suna's wife... and their child... and write in it that I, his son Juko, will continue to search for them. If there is a chance of them being alive, I will find them." He looked back at his compatriots, "But I will not stop there. I am going to stay in Lycania for another reason as well, if you wish to join me."

They looked at one another in surprise as he continued, "I have decided that the Quintus Dynasty must come to an end. I will stay and fight the bloodline that now sits upon the throne of Lycania until there are no more left. Will you join me?"

T'tembo spoke first, "Yes. I stand by you, Juko, even in this."

Felix nodded, "Aye, I stand with you as well."

Euric looked at Posides, who had maintained a terrified look during the entire journey, and shrugged, "I don't know what good we can do for you but, since I'm fairly certain I am out of a job, we'll join you as well, Juko. I have a place out in the hills of Vanizia to the northeast. We can stay there as you make your plans."

Juko smiled slightly, "I fear that you will have forfeited your *Rudus*."

"Yes," he sighed. "I realize that but what good did it do me anyway? I'm a Bestial like the rest of you. I was never truly free."

"Then thank you... my friend."

The Centurion led Tiberius and Spurious through the underground tunnels, towards the Palace.

Spurious held his father's hand, "The *curia* father. We must go there!"

"He's right, sire," the Centurion said. "It is the safest place in Odalia at the moment!"

"I care not where we go as long as someone brings me my powders for this headache!"

They continued to run towards the curia and the Emperor's vision became spotty before his eyes. As they neared the entrance that would take them up to the curia, they

could hear the sounds of the crowds rioting outside the Palace. "Close the doors to the Palace!" Tiberius shouted to the Centurion. "Call in the guards and go into the Ala District and slaughter them all! Have them kill every last one of them! Even the rats! I want their blood to flow into the streets like water!"

"Yes sir," the Centurion said as he ushered the Emperor and his son into the curia. Once inside, Spurius ran to the windows and peered out as if he were looking for someone.

Tiberius stood in the center of the room, his face twisting, "Can you hear them son?"

"Hear who, Father?"

"The Sirens! They are screaming their songs in my head!" Tiberius put his hands to his ears and squeezed, "Oh gods, I can't make them stop!"

Spurious ran past his father, ignoring his lamentations, and looked around the throne, "She's not here! She said she'd be here!"

Tiberius fell to his knees and shouted, "The screams! Can't you hear them? Why won't they stop?"

Spurious stood over his father and looked at him curiously, "I can make it stop, Father. She showed me how and it's very easy. Do you wish me to stop it for you?"

Tiberius grasped his son's clothes, the whites of his eyes becoming red as his pupils became pinpoints, "Please, my son! Yes! Release me from this pain! Make them stop!"

Not far from the city's walls, Timonus had just decided that it was time for the Lupa Faction to strike. But as they started to march towards Odalia's front gates, Camilla stopped them. "Wait, what is that sound?"

Timonus listened and soon heard the dreaded sounds of a riotous crowd coming from the city.

"Maybe the Giants have beaten us here after all!" shouted someone.

"No," he shook his head, "that's not the Giants." He turned and addressed them, "Stay here! All of you! It's not safe!" Timonus began to run towards the gates.

"Where are you going?"

"I will return for you. Do not leave this place, no matter what may happen!"

Hannah started to follow him but Julian grabbed her.

"Let me go, Julian! He needs me! I can save the Emperor!"

"No! If the Legate says stay put, it's for a reason!"

"Let me go! He *needs* me!"

He turned her towards him and shouted at her, "He doesn't even know you're his daughter!"

She could say nothing as tears began to form in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Hannah. Maybe we should've told him, after all."

She looked back over her shoulder and watched the Legate fade from her view. Her body sunk with the realization that she would probably never see him again and would never be able to tell him the truth of who she was.

Timonus ran around the city's walls until he arrived at its entrance. The gates had been left open and unguarded and he entered into Odalia in stunned silence. All around him people were fighting one another, including his men. He looked towards the palace and shaken from his stupor, headed towards it.

"Legate!" someone called to him. It was the Centurion. "You have returned!"

"What's happened here?"

"The people revolted during the *munus* and the Emperor gave the order to slaughter everyone in the Ala District!"

"Where is he?"

"The *curia*. He's safe there!"

"I'm taking command! Stop the slaughter immediately and have the legionaries return here!" Timonus ran into the Palace and made his way to the *curia*. The outer door was locked but easily broken as he used the hilt of his sword to smash into the door.

He was unprepared for what he saw before him.

Spurious stood before the throne, holding the blood covered Sword of Irae while his father lay face down at his feet, the floor awashed in his blood.

"Spurious," the Legate's face went white, "what have you done, boy?"

"I cured his headaches," he said, a strange light in his eyes.

Timonus ran and knelt down besides the Emperor's body, disbelieving what he saw before him.

"Rise, Legate," he heard a low female voice say to him. He looked up to see an older woman, dressed in the black robes of a *venefica*, step from the shadows behind the throne and place her gnarled stained hand upon Spurius' shoulders.

The boy's face lit up at the sight of her, "Mother! You are here! I knew you were!"

"I am, my son. Did I not tell you that I am always here, watching over you?" She looked back at the Legate and repeated, "Rise, Legate. Greet your new Emperor!"

"Your mad! I will do no such thing-"

She laughed, "Or if you do not, you will suffer a fate worse than death."

"I am in command of the Lycanian forces, they will be here soon and you will be -"

"Oh but, Legate, I have an army of my own and ah," she raised a finger to her ear, "I think I hear them now!" She laughed again as Timonus ran to the window, where he was greeted by terrified screams.

The Giants had arrived in Odalia.

"No!" he gasped as he turned back to her.

"You see, Legate, you have little choice. Serve the Emperor... or face the Giants. The choice is yours."

"But who are you?"

"I am Mother Marcella, once an outsider to the court but now no more."

Timonus thought of Hannah and the rest of the Lupa Faction that were camped outside of the walls. He thought of the people of the Ala District, being slaughtered where they stood. He thought of the steady flow of Giants as he could hear them marching into the city.

"What is your choice?"

Timonus looked from the screaming masses outside of the window and back to Mother Marcella, then to Spurius. Feeling powerless, he dropped to his knees, "I serve the Emperor of Odalia, as I always have."

She smiled coyly, her hands clasped around the boy's shoulders from behind, "As it should be. Long live Emperor Spurious!"

A few hours after the Giants' siege of Odalia, the Cavalli crested over a hill where they could see the grand city shining in the distance. The weary warriors couldn't believe their own eyes, for even from the safety of where they stood, they could see that Odalia was now crawling with Giants.

Severus' insides became ice as he turned to his brother, "What do we do now?"

Tacitus swallowed deeply, "We return home immediately and prepare for battle."

"We can't fight them, Tacitus!"

"Alone, no, but send your scouts to Noba, to the Tundra, the Land of the Golden Sun and all areas in between. We'll build our own army - the likes of which they've never seen!"

"Will such a thing work?"

He looked at his brother, "It must... for there is no other choice."

Away from the chaos, unaware of anything that was going on around them, sat Sotiria, rocking the infant Alexia. She smiled down at the baby who was making cooing noises as she looked up at her.

"My sister Agatha says there are no special children but don't listen to her. You are special, little one. More special than you know. You want me to tell you a story?"

The baby yawned and Sotiria laughed, "Alright, little one. Once upon a time, on the island of Icanthia existed a mighty kingdom called Thera. Thera was the most beautiful city in the world, even more beautiful than Odalia. Everyone in the world came there to do business and buy our steel. Then, one day, many generations ago, the Lycanian ruler grew jealous and decided that he wanted Thera for himself. So he mounted an attack with hundreds of ships.

"The people of Thera were furious! They defended their land and very nearly destroyed the entire Lycanian fleet. But just as the Emperor's ship landed upon Icanthia a large volcano erupted on the other side of the island, spewing ash and lava everywhere.

"Then while everyone was fleeing the volcano, the Emperor of Lycania cowardly slew our Queen, stealing her Sword of Irae for himself. He then returned to Lycania, claiming that the gods had buried Thera." She fell silent a moment as the images of the escape from her homeland flooded her mind.

Sotiria then began to rock the baby again as she continued, "Only, while most of the island was lost, Thera wasn't really buried and the people there began to rebuild, stone by stone, all in the hope to one day reclaim their former glory. And you, my dear," she lightly tapped the baby's nose, "are descended from that Queen and one day you will reclaim the Sword of Irae and Thera will be restored."

END