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SEAL OF ROME

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DEATH IS IN THE AIR

A SEAL OF ROME PREQUEL



EDEN MADDOX

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TACITUS & ARGUS: THE SOLDIERS

TACITUS

"There's another one," I hiss at Argus. "That's three."

A sick feeling curdles in my gut as I squint through the shadows at the unfamiliar guard stationed near the entrance of the palace. The presence of the somber man in a ceremonial red tunic and ornate armor means yet another member of the Praetorian Guard has been replaced by Prefect Falco within the last few weeks.

"What do you suppose Falco is up to?" Argus grunts, following my gaze. "Why all the changes?"

I shake my head while my mind struggles to tie these clues to the others haunting my brain. "It's too soon to guess, but we should tell Severus. He needs to keep an eye on Falco."

"Gonna be hard for him to do that while he's sitting inside gnawing on figs with the Emperor."

I fire an irritated look at my friend. His wide grin reveals a missing tooth and cracks the deep scar slicing over the left side of his face. He earned that battle wound long before we served together in the Sixth, so I've never known him without it. The

menacing scar suits his gruff demeanor and complements the intimidating brutality of his thick, muscular frame.

People say we're opposites in every way a soldier can be, but that never stood in the way of the instant connection we seemed to have. The night he suffered by my side during my torturous journey through hades was the moment he transformed from friend to brother.

He's fiercely loyal, and I'll take that over all other attributes any day.

"You know what I meant," I mutter. "Too many things are happening at once. Too many anomalies to be a coincidence. We can't ignore it anymore. We need to figure out..."

I go quiet. Even in the darkness, I sense his pitying look and grit my teeth.

Stand down, soldier. You're no longer a first-cohort Centurion. This isn't your problem. Your new job is to make sure no one steals some rich guy's stuff.

Working private security for wealthy merchants is a far cry from serving in the command center of Rome's top legions, but here we are.

His silent reminder stings with truth, but soldier blood was bred into me. Casting me out and stripping me of everything I held dear doesn't mean they can alter the very makeup of my being.

I'm a soldier. A warrior. My circumstances may have changed, but not my heart. No amount of scars on my back will transform what's in my soul.

Argus is the same, so I know his concern is more protectiveness than critique. He doesn't want to see me hurt again. He hates how my ingrained need for battle has made me downright reckless now that I have nothing left to lose.

But I have to fight something, and if it can't be invading armies, it will have to be whatever injustice I encounter on the filthy streets of Rome.

I scan my surroundings with constant vigilance, as years on a battlefield trained me to do. It's how I noticed the new guard—and the attention of the Consul's wife when they arrived a few hours ago. I ignored her flirtatious stare like I always do, but it wouldn't be the first time someone else's forbidden lust got me in trouble.

In a twisted way, it's what destroyed my life and landed me in this position.

The flicker of a torch exposes a new sliver of the shadows about a hundred paces away. I squint harder and catch the briefest glimpse of a figure slumped against a wall.

"Pluto's chains," I breathe out, launching toward the obscure form.

Argus flinches at my sudden movement, but I don't have time to explain. I don't even know *what* to explain.

It's a feeling more than a fact at this point.

My heart pounds as I cover the distance to the phantom presence in the shadows. The torchlight has changed its trajectory toward new targets, but I'd know death anywhere. I can sense it now. I've experienced it enough in my twenty-six years to feel it in the air—sometimes before it happens.

This time, I'm too late to prevent it.

"No, no, no," I whisper in a hoarse voice as I drop to my knees beside the figure.

I glance around for any sign of a threat, but it's only Argus approaching from the left. Whoever did this is no longer here. The cowardly murderer probably never was. These are the kinds of crimes committed in secret, then dumped for the public to dispose of and ignore.

These are the monsters I used to hunt... until the night they came for me.

* * *

ARGUS

“Pluto’s chains!” Tacitus grunts, charging west toward the stables.

I stare after him in surprise, but as usual can’t see the threat his remarkable perception has identified. Unfortunately for my easy night, I trust his judgement more than my own, so all I can do is mumble a curse and follow.

Should have known there would be nothing easy about this assignment. Nothing with Tacitus ever is.

My friend may be a decade younger, but the kid possesses one of the most strategic military minds I’ve ever encountered during my service in Rome’s top legions. He’s a prodigy, excelling at everything from his exceptional command of a gladius to his ability to garner respect from men twice his age. In a cruel twist for a cursed man, he’s just as impressive to look at. The kid’s handsome face and athletic physique rivals any of the statues lining the corridors of the Emperor’s palace.

Along with his prestigious military background, Tacitus was literally bred to lead. He was destined for greatness and should be in the praetorium with Rome’s elite generals right now, not guarding the property of some opportunistic merchant.

General Severus himself believed Tacitus would surpass us all one day. And the young officer was on course to do so.

Until one horrific night destroyed his life and stole everything from him. Beneath the screams and blood, I followed him into the bowels of hades that fateful day, but the cost to me doesn’t come close to what Tacitus lost.

How he’s still functioning after what happened, I’ll never understand. But I’m eternally grateful—he’s one of the only good men left in this godsforsaken city.

Slipping further into the shadows, I struggle to see what caught his attention. Is he hiding from one of his many admir-

ers? The thought makes me smile, even as a twinge moves through my chest at the image of my own estranged wife.

I dodge a fountain, mirroring Tacitus' hurried pace—and stop cold.

My friend's pained expression cuts to me, tugging at something in my chest. He's crouched over a slumped body.

Gods, it's just a small slave boy.

"Is he...?" I can't even finish the sentence.

My friend turns his attention back to the young victim, who's still clutching his bloody tunic in desperate fists.

Tacitus' chest expands in deep breaths as he scans the recently deceased boy. I sense his mind working. Practically see the righteous anger radiating from him.

"See the precise cuts? This was no animal," he spits coldly.

Haunted brown eyes turn back to me, and I shiver at the fear and determination in his gaze. He wants answers. Justice. He always does, and has proven his willingness to suffer unspeakable horrors to get it. That's probably one of the many reasons Severus chose him for what's coming.

Why the legendary general also chose *me*—a plebeian grunt legiary who's decent with a sword but nothing else—I have no idea.

And I can't ignore the churning in my stomach telling me this ghastly act is somehow related to the strange instructions from Severus earlier in the day.

Tacitus' eyes widen as they search my face. Instinctively, I know he's having the same thought.

"Do you think... Could whatever happened to this boy be related to why Severus wants us to attend the games in two days? Maybe even what Falco is doing with The Praetorian Guard?"

I swallow the boulder in my throat and settle my gaze back on the unfortunate slave. If it is, this poor kid was an innocent pawn caught in a malicious scheme. No one will grieve his

death, let alone seek justice or meaning in it. These things happen too often now to raise alarms.

Rome's heart beats with the smoldering rot of decay.

Severus hasn't told us much about what he's planning. Even less about why he wants us at the gladiatorial munera in two days. It's unnerving, especially since he hates those callous homages to the worst of humanity even more than we do.

Fresh rage surges from my soul as I survey the dead slave boy, followed by my courageous friend who has endured so much pain at the hands of lesser men's depraved ambitions.

And I'm sick of it. Sick of the greed, the violence, the celebration of everything vile while the innocent are slaughtered. Rich men celebrate, while the poor and weak suffer. The honorable are stripped and cut down as the corrupt scheme with gluttonous appetites for power.

"I don't know anything except this," I growl. "Evil is winning, and I'm done sitting back. I can't guess what Severus has planned. But if he's calling us to fight, let's fraxing fight."

MALLIA: THE ARISTOCRAT

MALLIA

Dancers wearing nothing but body paint weave through a troop of skilled acrobats. Music swells from every corner of the banquet hall, blending with raucous laughter and animated conversation. Delicacies from every corner of the Empire fill trays, served by the most beautiful slaves money can buy.

And none of it interests me.

What began as boredom with yet another ostentatious display of wealth has quickly transformed into a sick feeling in my gut. Something is wrong, and no one seems to sense it. Least of all, the Emperor's niece Aurelia.

"Can you believe what Drusilla is wearing?" she huffs beside me on the couch.

She tugs at a ringlet of blond hair while glowering at the senator's wife. More curls and braids wrap around her head in an elaborate style that took her hairdressers the entire day to assemble. Her staggering patience to sit still for so long is almost admirable. She forgave my simple, but elegant crown of

brunette braids because of the “divine” pearl comb woven into them.

“She wore it to Senator Ovidus’ birthday celebration last month,” she continues. “Remember? We were scandalized by her emerald earrings.”

I don’t remember, so it’s hard to feel “scandalized” by whatever offense the earrings committed.

I twist a tight smile in her direction, but as usual her snobbery isn’t paying attention to anything except itself. I don’t know why she insists on having me around when my presence seems irrelevant to her.

“Perhaps Drusilla has apologized to the gods for the emeralds and wishes to make amends with a better choice of jewelry,” I say in a dry tone.

“Hmm... maybe you’re right,” she muses without a trace of irony.

I shift my gaze to the acrobats to hide an eye roll.

Several paces away, my father socializes with a cluster of other prestigious senators, including emerald-wearing Drusilla’s husband. I recognize a few surrounding him, but most are not frequent guests at our villa. Despite the amiable façade, I understand enough about the scheming games of the elite to know many of those men would just as soon shove a knife in my father’s back as share a meal.

Yet, even my cautious, observant father seems at ease. Well, as much as the Emperor’s closest ally in the senate can ever enjoy peace.

“Tell me, why does my uncle host these events when he looks like he’d rather be anywhere else?” Aurelia whines. “Look at him! We’re celebrating the first anniversary of *his* accession.”

I follow her scowl to where the Emperor sits in his place of honor—and go rigid.

A shiver runs through me when his gaze cuts away from my

face, as if he'd been watching me as well. It's the third time tonight I've caught his intense stare.

The first glance I shook off as chance. The second, coincidence. But when his closest advisor, the retired General Severus, vacated the couch beside him to lean against a column near Aurelia and me, I could no longer deny their interest. I have no idea what an unattached young woman like myself has to do with anything involving the two most powerful men in The Empire. My father, sure, but I'm barely more than a girl.

The few things I can think of make the Falernian wine we're drinking sour in my stomach.

After the unsettling eye contact, the Emperor's abrupt transition back to aloof observation almost makes me question what I saw. Maybe my boredom with this circus is inventing conspiracies.

To look at him now, it would be easy to dismiss my strange paranoia. His expression has eased into somber detachment, but not in a cold way. There's a nobility about him—a stern integrity that demands reverence.

I've only interacted with the man a few times, but my father has tremendous respect for him. According to him, Rome has not had a leader of this man's honor and strength in a long time.

It's the opposite reputation of his niece, who's status as his only living relative has blessed her with a pampered existence she's more than happy to exploit. Unfortunately for me, as the daughter of her uncle's biggest supporter in the senate, she's decided I'm the most suitable choice to be her primary companion.

I'm accustomed to hiding my growing disillusionment with this privileged world, just not having it tested so frequently and with such lurid intensity.

"You're dreary tonight as well," Aurelia observes in a critical tone. "Perhaps we should pursue more... *carnal*... entertainment to cheer you up?"

A lewd smile spreads over her mouth as she tosses a discreet nod toward a handsome slave behind us. Instinctively, my gaze lands on the expressionless young man stationed against the wall. I don't know his name. I doubt Aurelia does either.

By the clench of his jaw, he heard the threat.

By the grin on Aurelia, she doesn't notice or care.

"He's supposedly a tribal prince from Britannia, a gift from Cornelia and Consul Matho to my uncle. Cornelia said he was the most expensive slave in the latest shipment from the province."

I try to muster the expected appreciation for her boast, but it's getting harder and harder to pretend everything about our privileged world doesn't disgust me.

There's nothing polite about human suffering.

Fresh anxiety pools in my stomach at the reminder of the more public portion of this "celebration" coming in two days. As excruciating as these feasts are, it's the gladiatorial games I'm truly dreading. I begged my father for permission to turn down Aurelia's invitation to join her and the Emperor in their private box. He unequivocally refused.

"The women in our circles vie for such a position, Mallia. You've been granted the honor without so much as a flattering word."

In the end, I agreed. I always do. There's no other choice for an unmarried daughter, but I'll never understand how forcing men to tear each other apart for sport can be considered entertainment.

Even worse, we—

Aurelia's piercing yelp cuts into my thoughts. A terrified slave girl drops to her knees, frantically wiping at a blotch of wine on my friend's gown.

"You idiot!" Aurelia roars, yanking the girl away by the hair.

I flinch when Aurelia slaps her, my stomach curling in on itself. I sense my maid's tension behind me. Danae might be a slave, but she's my closest friend. A sister, really. I can't imagine

treating her—or anyone—with the cruelty I constantly see around me.

The other slave girl's eyes are wide with fear, and my fists tighten in my lap. A protest rises in my throat, but it's not my place to intervene. As much as it makes me squirm, I have no right or power to challenge the ancient system.

"This gown is brand new!" Aurelia seethes, glowering at the terrified girl. "I should have you flogged for ruining it! Worse. I will have you—"

Flogged?

"Aurelia," I soothe in a calm voice. My gentle tone belies my pounding heart. I can't believe I'm doing this, but I also can't stomach the thought of unjust violence. I'll have more than my fill in two days at the gladiatorial munera.

Aurelia turns her glare on me as I subtly free the girl from her grip. Once released, the young girl inches back, shaking.

"No! I will not let you talk me out of this, Mallia. These slaves are lazy! Clumsy and useless! I will have them all flogged! Right here in front of the entire gathering! Every single one!"

She won't. Aurelia is as dramatic as she is spoiled. Nor would the Emperor allow such a brutal spectacle without merit. But the threat hangs heavy over the surrounding slaves.

The raucous party has masked most of the present commotion, but a few heads have turned. The other servants, including the captive "prince" from earlier, remain dutifully silent, but I can tell by the strain in their stances their fear is very real. I can practically hear Danae's silent screams, begging me to do something.

I force a sly smile through the prickle of fear. "Flogged for what? For giving you an opportunity to shop for a new wardrobe? Didn't you tell me yesterday Flaccus procured the most beautiful fabrics you've ever seen and you wished you'd waited before purchasing this gown from Alsinius?"

Aurelia opens her mouth to snap back, then closes it. Her

head tilts in thought, her shoulders sagging as she chews her lip and scans the large stain on her vibrant yellow palla.

"It was Tyrian purple silk," she mumbles. "My uncle never would have allowed such extravagance for a mere banquet."

"Because you already *had* a magnificent silk gown for the occasion. But now..."

I wave over the damaged fabric, and a slow smile spreads on Aurelia's painted lips.

"You're a genius, Mallia."

The tension in my shoulders eases with my conspiratorial grin, but inside the panic is still throbbing behind the practiced façade.

As Aurelia waves for another cup, movement on my other side draws my attention. I glance over to see the retired General Severus just a few paces away.

Watching me.

His stoic expression reveals nothing, and he quickly averts his gaze to a new target. I shudder again through the odd exchange, even more surprised when he signals the Emperor's personal valet.

The slave rushes over and bends close. As the general speaks in hushed tones, the younger man's gaze flickers to me before crossing to the Emperor on the other side of the room. The slave nods and takes off toward the Emperor.

Aurelia is back to complaining about something, but I don't hear her anymore. The circus around me has faded into a dull murmur. Only one thing has claimed my full attention.

My heart pounds when the valet whispers something to the Emperor and the powerful man goes still. He shoots a grave look at his advisor.

Then me.

Without another word, both men abruptly leave their positions and slip from the room.

JASON: THE GLADIATOR

JASON

The stench of sweat and blood burns my lungs as I study the tense stances of my opponents. After a brief scan of their violent stares, I focus on their sandaled feet.

The eyes can lie. The feet never do.

As expected, Ino lunges first, striking low to my left while Musa comes in from the right with his longer blade. Dust kicks up from the ground when I spin to deflect Ino's gladius then Musa's spatha in one fluid motion. Reverberations from the collisions radiate up my arm, and I shake off the discomfort to quickly reset.

Both opponents move in again, this time from opposite sides to divide my attention. A surge of adrenaline forces every sense into sharp focus. I brace for pain, having no choice but to accept a blow from Ino's practice sword in order to fend off Musa. The sacrifice is worth it when it allows me to reposition and launch a series of rapid counter strikes that catches them off guard. They never recover, and I drive them all the way back past the line.

Musa roars in frustration at the third defeat of the day. Ino offers a conceding nod and smirk.

I may have won this round, but not without effort. They're on a mission in today's training. Maybe I am too. Word came in that all three of us are fighting in tomorrow's games to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the Emperor's accession. That also means it's almost certain the Emperor will be in attendance. Being chosen for such a prestigious contest is a huge honor—my brothers are already drunk on the lust for glory.

But I never get distracted by such things. My life is pain and survival. I've never known anything but the horrors of slavery, and right now, survival is a two-on-one sparring session with motivated adversaries. One of whom hates me with the fire of Hades.

"I've prayed to the gods to spare your life, just so I can have the pleasure of shoving a blade through your skull one day," Musa growls, then leaps forward in a surprise attack.

Unprepared for the strike, I lift my wooden gladius late. The practice weapon absorbs most of the hit, but not without a painful jerk on my wrist. Sensing his advantage, Musa swings for my head. This time I'm ready, and duck to send him into a humiliating spin through nothing.

He stumbles on his feet when he lands, but manages to stay upright. Murder burns in his eyes as he resets.

"You may bear the title of champion, but you will always be one of Lepidus' whores," he sneers.

I ignore the familiar taunt, easily deflecting the sloppy lunge that comes with it. His reckless temper is his biggest weakness. If we ever faced each other in a real fight, triggering his rage would make for an easy victory.

Ino is the opposite story. My friend moves with a more patient approach, but his technique is weaker. As a recent prisoner of war, he hasn't yet mastered Roman weaponry. His

recent captivity also means he hasn't adjusted to the realities of slavery and the harsh conditions of a gladiatorial school.

Not like I have.

Movement on the balcony above us draws my attention, and I squint up to see a hooded figure in the shadows behind a statue. Opius Plinius, the owner of this ludus, speaks to the visitor with animated gestures, like the person is just another wealthy patron here to enjoy human suffering as a fun diversion. But something is off about the observer's reactions. The man barely moves, as if he doesn't want to be noticed. It's an unsettling behavior for the elite who thrive on flashy displays and constant adoration. They live to be seen.

A lifetime at the complete mercy of men like them has taught me to read every nuance. Every blink, hand movement, or adjustment of the stance.

This person isn't here for pleasure.

My heart rate picks up at the anomaly. Anything unusual typically doesn't end well for me.

"Giving up?" Musa jeers, dragging my focus from the mysterious visitor.

"Was that a petition to the gods?" I return, settling into a cocky stance. "Because that would be your only chance at victory."

Musa snarls as he sprints forward. Ino joins him, but their attack is messy and uncoordinated.

I go high to Ino's right side while twisting left, forcing him off balance. He loses his footing and crashes into Musa, sending both to the ground. I step back with an amused headshake while rolling my shoulders.

It's too easy.

Musa flies to his feet. "Bestia filius!" he roars at Ino. "No wonder you were captured like a dog!"

Ino backs away with an anxious look. "Calm down! It was—"

I fling my arm out to grip Musa's wrist when he moves to strike.

He turns his fury on me, and I release his wrist with a hard shove. To further irritate him, I ignore his corresponding rant and transfer my focus to Ino.

"A word?" I say to my friend.

Ino shoots a nervous glance behind me, so I know Musa is stalking me. Probably frothing at the mouth while plotting my gruesome death. Nothing new. And when I spot Doctore's approach, I relax. Even Musa isn't careless enough to step out of line with the instructor's eager vine stick so close.

"You made yourself an easy target just now," I tell Ino. "In a real fight, you'd be dead."

"You're too fast! I couldn't adjust in time."

"Exactly my point. Your stance is too rigid. You need to relax your body to allow a freer flow of movement."

He nods absently, and I draw in a deep breath when I sense the real problem.

He's doing everything he can to project confidence, but the fear in his dark brown eyes gives him away. Tomorrow will be his first death match. He has a few victories under his belt, but this is the first real test.

I know the terror haunting him. The unsettling mix of anticipation and dread as you begin the excruciating countdown to your death. But it's not the fear of Hades that consumes you. It's the enormity of the spectacle. The knowledge that thousands of strangers will be salivating over your suffering. Cheering for your blood. Reveling in your pain.

Most gladiators like Musa accept the false veil of glory draped over our tragic fates. I've never been able to do that.

I lean close to Ino. "*They are afraid*," I whisper.

His surprised gaze cuts to me, and I return a firm look. "Your opponent faces the same death you do," I explain in a low

voice only he can hear. "They are just as afraid as you are. Remember that tomorrow."

Gratitude mixes with lingering fear in his eyes as he swallows hard. He nods once, then straightens with alarm.

"Jason!" he cries.

Before I can react, a wall of muscle and rage slams into my back. Air leaves my lungs as I fly forward and hit the ground at an awkward angle. A sickening *pop* explodes from my shoulder, followed by searing pain.

No no no. By Juno's breath, please no.

But the truth plunges through me with nauseating clarity. When I command my arm to move, there's nothing.

I glare up at Musa's leering grin as Doctore rushes toward us, belting orders.

Fellow gladiators hurry in. Musa is seized and dragged away. Others reach for me. My shoulder throbs as Ino tugs me to my feet by my good arm. Yelling and cursing swirl around us. Dust and madness.

And in the chaos, my focus climbs skyward. Up and to the left, toward a lone hooded figure observing with ghostly calm.

SEVERUS: THE ADVISOR

SEVERUS

It only took a few scans of Opius Plinius' slaves to identify the one who brought me to the lanista's door. Stories of "Jason the Fearless Murmillo" have circulated through all corners of Rome. They say nothing rattles him, no man can defeat him, and even the gods envy his beauty and strength.

But that's not what has my attention. The Empire's ludi are filled with handsome faces and skilled warriors.

"Tell me more about that one," I say, my gaze seared to the man easily repelling a joint attack. His body flows with the effortless synchronicity of a dancer more than a warrior. It's a rare sight on these brutal sands—and mesmerizing. Decades of training soldiers has shown me instincts like these can't be taught.

"Ah, our champion. Good choice, my lord," Opius Plinius gushes. "They say you have an impeccable eye. It's no wonder our great Emperors always seem to choose you as their advisor. How is our glorious Emperor, by the way? I have not met him yet."

Nor will you.

I flick an impatient nod toward the grounds below. "Tell me about him. What's his story? Prisoner of war?"

"Prisoner of war?" the man laughs. "Hardly. I purchased him from Lepidus seven years ago. Best investment I ever made."

The infamous brothel owner? An unexpected twinge pierces my chest as I squint at the young man. It's a strange reaction for a hardened general who's spent most of his life around war. I've breathed violence and death for as long as I can remember, and yet, this young gladiator has probably experienced horrors even I can't imagine.

If he grew up in Lepidus' evil lair...

I shudder and force away the disturbing images. That's not why I'm here.

For now, anyway.

"The man trains against two opponents, while all the rest are in pairs," I continue. "The others are no match for him, I presume?"

"There is not a gladiator in this empire who can match him," Plinius boasts. "Ino and Musa are two of our most promising fighters, but even combined they are barely a challenge for Jason, as you can see."

"Ino is the younger one, the secutor?"

Plinius nods. "And Musa is our most decorated retiarius. I promise he's not happy about being assigned a spatha in today's training instead of his beloved net and trident. See how frustrated he looks?"

A child could see that, but I suspect it's more than the man's unconventional weapon that's aggravating him. Based on my brief evaluation, no weapon would even the odds against an elite fighter like Jason.

I study the young man's balanced stance, the way he appears to glide in all directions at once. His technique is flawless. His concentration and determination, inspiring. These qualities

alone would make him a viable candidate for my purposes, but I need more than a good fighter.

Jason fires two rapid strikes in opposite directions, forcing Ino to stumble. The secutor falls into his partner, knocking both to the ground.

Musa flies to his feet. “Bestia filius!” he shouts at Ino. “No wonder you were captured like a dog!”

The younger man shrinks back and lifts his hands. “Calm down! It was—”

Musa moves to strike, but Jason catches his arm.

The aggressor spins toward Jason, spewing threats and curses we can hear from the balcony. Jason doesn’t react as he releases Musa’s wrist with a bored expression and pulls Ino aside.

Surprised, I lean forward for a better view.

Jason appears to be offering Ino instruction—most likely regarding the sloppy footwork that led to the collision. Musa prowls nearby, ready to pounce, but backs down when the doctore approaches. The instructor’s hard stare and threatening vine stick would have that effect on any unruly gladiator.

I expect more conflict when the doctore notices Jason paused their training to usurp his role as instructor for Ino, but he gives the pair a cursory glance and keeps walking. Even the second highest authority in the ludus is willing to bow to Jason’s leadership, intuition, and skill. That tells me a lot.

Jason’s chiseled and powerful physique towers over Ino’s lean, still developing form, but it’s the change in the champion’s expression that has my attention. There’s a patience in his manner as he instructs the less-skilled man. A strange and unexpected gentleness.

How can a deadly warrior, who’s been subjected to the cruelest horrors this world can inflict on a person, still show compassion for his opponent?

“Beautiful, isn’t he?” Plinius murmurs in a slick tone. “As

popular for his appearance as his victories. He's a favorite among our visitors. Requested more than any other slave in this establishment. Did you know Senator Marcus Aratus Varro frequents our humble ludus? He was here just last week."

I ignore the pointless monologue, still riveted to the scene below us. Something important is happening here. I feel it. There's a tension in the air that all my years leading Rome's great legions has taught me to recognize. I came here with a very specific mission. It feels like I'm on the precipice of achieving it.

A slave boy rushes toward Plinius with a message regarding the lanista's wife, and I'm only too relieved when the wearying man excuses himself to tend to her.

Now alone, I focus back on the action, free to observe without distraction.

Jason is giving instruction in hushed tones, while Ino absorbs the private lesson with an expression of unbridled awe. Again, I'm struck by the patience and care with which Jason treats him. Champions are known to be vain, arrogant, and entitled. By all expectations, he should be acting like a god among men, not taking the time to share his expertise with an inferior.

And *that's* why I'm here. It's the contradictions that capture my attention. The extraordinary displays of human nature set apart from the rest.

Like Mallia, Senator Justus' daughter, Jason is a blend of fascinating paradoxes. I'm searching for the unexpected. Individuals who transcend their situation.

While Jason and Ino talk, movement from behind them catches my eye.

I flinch when Musa launches forward. Without warning, he slams into Jason's back, knocking him to the ground with a violent *thud*. Jason falls hard, landing awkwardly on his side.

Other gladiators rush over to restrain Musa.

The doctore runs toward the fray, barking orders to the guards.

Ino and another slave help Jason from the ground, and I wince when I see the gladiator's arm dangling at his side. A cold trickle of dread runs through me at how this development could affect my plan. There's too much at stake for things to fall apart now.

I mumble a curse for the weak retiarius whose temper might have undone months of preparations.

Jason gingerly squeezes his dislocated shoulder, as if holding it in place while he settles a hard stare on his attacker. Musa continues hurling insults at him, undeterred as he's dragged toward a tall, grisly post jutting from the center of the training grounds. Chains hang from a hook at the top, serving as a constant reminder of these men's status and fate.

After a career in the military, I'm accustomed to violence, but a ludus reeks of suffering far beyond anything soldiers experience. While my soldiers are trained to endure fear, carnage, and torture, these men face such brutality as their training.

Once Musa's wrists are anchored above his head, the doctore turns to address the other gladiators circling around them.

"You are brothers!" he roars. "Attacking an opponent in such a cowardly way is a grave offense, but even worse is demonstrating such weakness! There is no glory in challenging an unsuspecting opponent. Such acts bring only shame. Ten lashes!"

He turns to the bound man and prepares his vine stick.

Soon, the *thwack* of pliable wood against human flesh echoes throughout the courtyard. The man gasps with each hit, but never protests or resists. He would have expected such a punishment for his infraction, which means his hatred for Jason was worth the pain and humiliation. If they ever faced each

other in the arena, I can only imagine the violence such a personal vendetta would unleash.

Part of me wonders if Plinius purposely orchestrates these rivalries among his men. After all, the lanista's success rests on his ability to put on a show. What better drama than internal feuds and personal grudges?

At ten, the doctore commands his guards to release Musa and return him to his cell.

Jason's expression is unreadable as he stands motionless, loosely holding his wounded arm. If not for the injury, an observer would never know this incident had anything to do with him.

Something in the instructor's demeanor softens when he shifts his attention to Jason, but my vantage point is too obstructed to read more than that. After a short pause, the stern doctore squares his shoulders back into ultimate authority.

"Your turn," he barks at Jason, nodding toward the post.

My pulse picks up. Blood pounds in my ears as I watch the young man step forward. His grip tightens on his arm, and even the guards seem hesitant as they approach him.

The doctore glances from the post, to Jason, to the surrounding men. His fist clenches around the vine stick, and my fingernails dig into my palms. He can't seriously intend to chain the young gladiator in his current condition.

"Forgo the chains," he says finally.

My relief fades when he commands Jason to kneel, facing the post. The slave lowers to his knees with practiced ease that sends a chill through me. His scarred back rises and falls with deep breaths as he braces himself. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing.

"Awareness can be the difference between life or death," the doctore directs at the line of men.

No one moves, but I sense the resentment emanating from

the observers. Ino's murderous gaze is locked on the instructor, mirroring the righteous anger burning through me.

"Five lashes for letting down your guard and giving advantage to an inferior opponent," he fires at Jason.

Jason doesn't react, and I watch with solemn wrath as he takes his punishment with barely a flinch. When it's finished, he pushes to his feet with his good arm. Guards move in, but there's a reverence in their approach, like they're assisting instead of securing him.

"Take him to the infirmary to have his shoulder addressed," the doctore says.

Jason never looks back as he's led away. He doesn't see the regret sink over the instructor's face or the way the man's knuckles tighten around the vine stick. Nor does he see the anger and awe on his brothers' faces as they pause in stunned respect until he disappears from view.

But I do. I see it all. And it's the last bit of evidence I need to know we've found him.

He's the final piece.

"Do you feel it, Severus?" the Emperor said the night he commissioned this quest. "Do you feel the death in the air? For generations, the elite have allowed corruption to pollute our great city. Their thirst for power and selfish gains has all but erased the honor of what it means to be Roman. Her people starve while they feast. The masses suffer while men like us oppress them in service to our own profane comfort and selfish desires."

"Have you learned of a threat, Imperator?" I asked.

"Every breath is a threat in these dark times. Every heartbeat. I did not accept this position to rule, but to serve. I know my time is short. Many scheme to eliminate me as we speak. But I've sworn an oath to protect this Empire and its people for as long as I'm alive, and I plan to do exactly that. Evil has reigned for far too long. It's time to fight back."

Most would laugh at my belief that Rome's best hope lies in two disgraced soldiers, a slave, and a young senator's daughter. But I learned long ago a person's merit has nothing to do with class, sex, or occupation.

These four unsuspecting heroes have no idea they're about to be the center of a secret war. By tomorrow night, the fate of The Empire will rest in their hands.

We all serve Rome. They might be the only ones who can save it.

* * *

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