



Gabrina Garza

ADENO

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...Agony burrowed into his heart as he thought of someone discovering her here, now.

“I won’t let him kill you,” she promised.

He reached through the bars and touched her cheek and chin, ran his finger along her lips. With his eyes trained on hers, he caressed her, promised her a night spent far away from this place. Bodies naked and trembling, hair dampened with the rain like sugary mist on the meadows as they lay together, joined as they both craved. He looked her over, imagined his hands cupping her hips, thought of his fingers tangled in her hair grown long once more. Immediately his gaze focused on her belly and the empty womb he wished to fill. He needed her more than ever on the eve of his death, but more than need, he loved her and feared for her.

“Don’t die,” he forced himself to say. He squeezed her hand harder than necessary. “Nas, don’t die for me.”

“Deno—”

“It’s not worth it.”

She squeezed his hand, then pulled away. “You think it is worth living if I see you die?”

Helpless behind the bars, he watched her pad away, a phantom in a billow of dark silk...

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ADENO

BY

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ADENO
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*To Beth, Sloane, Sunila, and Dorothy for your suggestions,
your interest, and most of all your friendship.*

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Nasora firmly pressed her palms to the hard, chiseled plane of the injured man's chest. Eyes closed, she reminded herself that she'd seen worse, but a small voice in her head taunted her with the cruel truth: Most of the slaves didn't survive for long.

With a grunt of exertion she leaned over him, waiting for the leaf she'd crushed to his flesh to release its heady scent. Breath by unsteady breath, his bunched muscles relaxed as the fumes filled his lungs and steadied his heartbeat. Sedated, he wouldn't argue or fuss. With any luck—if could be called luck—servants would return him to his cell before he regained consciousness.

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“Drift,” she murmured.

Energized heat warmed her palms, and she took a deep breath, attempting to block out the cacophony within the medical ward and concentrate on this injured man.

“He breathes,” Turvo whined in his high, rat-like tone. The robust, barrel-chested man looked as though he should have a voice befitting a lion, but he never managed more than a cowardly squeak. “That means he lives to fight another day.”

She ignored the dark-skinned Miorian and placed her heated palm on Adeno’s rock-hard chest. With a puff of air, she blew her straight, dark locks from her eyes until no veil of hair obscured the vision of pain before her.

“What are you waiting for?” Turvo sneered.

“He barely breathes,” she replied at last. “I wait for my strength to heal him, Quist Turvo.”

The slave warrior’s heart thumped, a slow rhythm against her hand. Eyes pressed painfully shut, she willed him to survive another fight, another bloody moment in a slave’s life. Smile, she thought desperately, look up at me and smile.

Coins jingled in the fat man’s pocket and disrupted the flow of her thoughts. “Make haste, Healer,” Turvo snapped. “There is no time to caress him. He fights tomorrow.”

She allowed her fingers to graze over the warrior’s nipples, felt the twinge in his muscles as he reacted on a primal level to her gentle, rousing stimulation. He wouldn’t live to fight, but he’d live for the temptation of sex.

“A week,” she corrected, not bothering to face him. She despised the Quist’s pudgy face and his lifeless eyes. That he

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made his profit off another man's death repulsed her. "A week of rest or you merely waste my time."

"Your time?" A chuckle escaped and jiggled his belly. "You have no time, Healer. Your every minute belongs to your governess."

"Leave at once," she replied, her voice strained for a hint of respect. Her nose wrinkled as she breathed in sickness and death. Teeth grinding, she stared ahead at the black rock wall and wished he would leave her, give her a moment to heal this broken man. "I cannot concentrate on my patient with you hovering behind me."

The sound of ill-gotten coin signaled his footsteps, and when the metallic symphony of gold finally drowned to the moans of the dying, she glanced down and gasped.

"Nas," Adeno breathed, his eyes clouded, face pale. "You cut your hair."

"Quiet," she whispered. She still sighed, grateful to hear his voice.

"When did you cut it?"

"Two weeks ago." She chuckled, thinking it typical of a man not to immediately notice the difference in a woman's hair.

"Why?"

"My governess suggested I do so," she murmured.

A rush of pain visibly swept through him, though even if his face hadn't contorted, she still would have experienced the tightness in his muscles, the heaviness in his gut that threatened with sickness for both of them. Immediately she

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drew her hand away, and with it the blackness crowding her vision receded. She needed to concentrate or his wounds would leave them both on the brink of death.

“Here.” After a moment to gain her composure, she pressed her hand to his damp forehead and bent to look him in the eye. Her free hand crushed the leaf to his flesh and released the strong, sweet scent, the aroma of deep, inviting sleep.

“No, I want to feel it.”

“Rest,” she whispered when his shoulders hunched and he resisted the herb. His head thrashed to the side, and she placed her palm to his cheek, to the forbidden surface of smooth, freshly-shaven flesh. Their gazes locked—his filled with determination, hers struggling to abolish pity. “Rest far from here, Deno. Take long, deep breaths.”

Sometimes he violently protested, but today his jaw went slack, his smooth lips soft and slightly parted. A curl of black hair rested above his brow, and she gently smoothed it away. His square face appeared peaceful and flawless—handsome—now that she’d sedated him.

“Think of the hills and the pass leading north,” she murmured, her voice a soft, hollow whisper in the damp, ill-lit quarters that served as a medical ward beneath the Emperor’s Stadium. “Think of the rain like sugary mist on the meadows, and the white blotches of hundreds of sheep grazing for the summer. Think of what we shall never see again, not in this life, and perhaps not the next either.”

He drifted now, his lungs drawing in more of the Sleeping

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Leaf that would allow him to float on his dreams through an hour of surgery and mystical repair. Fortunate, she thought, to escape this place if even for an hour.

Now she needed to close her eyes, clear her mind, and tend to him. With each deep breath, she built up her energy as she sterilized a needle with a candle's flame. Heat seared through her fingertips, static pooled in the palm of her outstretched hand as she prepared to heal the opened wounds.

A bloody hand gripped her thin wrist and pulled her close. The needle almost dropped from her grasp, and the violent wrenching nearly sent her hand directly into the flame. She shrieked, but the surrounding agony swallowed her surprise.

"What have you—"

Two wide, fearful eyes met her gaze as he inhaled a sharp, desperate breath. It jarred him, this interruption from a dreamless sleep, this passage of an hour that, to his body, seemed like days.

"Are there still men able to fight?" he questioned, his voice bordering on a command for answers.

She looked into her assigned patient's wide eyes and frowned, knowing he had no recollection of their previous conversation. "They have summoned the Scales," she said evenly. As he grasped her wrist, she sought to remove herself, but he held her physically, emotionally.

His hardened expression faltered, and she allowed him to lace his fingers with hers. Realization hit that he was once again in the care of his Healer, his broken form given yet another chance for repair before the arena destroyed him

again.

“I’m here, Deno,” she said quietly.

Drums rolled, muffled by the roar of a bloodthirsty crowd two floors above their heads. Bits of dust and debris fell from the cracks in the rock walls and ceiling as the underground shook. She covered his torso, but not in time to cover his wounds. A Scale shrieked its battle cry, followed by the beating of feet and wings against the arena walls.

Nasora ignored the sounds of bloodshed and took a deep breath. The serrated scythe lay shrouded in alabaster gauze. She did not know why a bloody weapon was ceremoniously wrapped and given to the victor. It was not her duty as a woman to think. It was her duty as a Healer, however, to tend the wound created by the razor’s edge.

The wound, straight and clean, swept from the arena warrior’s armpit down to his hip. Such a serious injury would leave her drained for hours, possibly even a day or two. She’d grown accustomed to the fatigue and never complained, especially to the warriors who lay before her, their faces contorted with agony.

“How long have you done this?” he asked, his voice heavy with the urge to sleep.

“You know how long,” she replied under her breath, mustering the courage to dismiss him.

Despite the pain that turned his skin gray with agony, he managed a grin. His smile invited her to meet his gaze, but she refused his dangerous beckoning.

“Say it,” he tempted, his voice a deep, encouraging growl.

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It prickled her skin and sent a flurry through her belly. “I want to hear your voice.”

Her gaze lowered. Despite herself, she gave into the temptation of his voice and smiled. Long ago she’d surrendered to the sound of his voice, memorized the way he spoke, the soft, barely noticeable drawl of a man born to foreign soil. Both of them didn’t belong to this land, yet they were shackled, enslaved by customs and laws they’d learned to fear.

“Nine years.” A rarity for a Healer. Most came as infants, not sixteen-year-old girls pushed from their mother’s desperate arms. “The same as you, Adeno.”

“Tell me more.”

“I’ve been here since South Clenath broke from Derage rule.”

“What else?”

“Since I returned the hens to health after my father slit their throats. It angered him to have to kill them all over again.”

He studied her. “I remember. He locked you away for it.”

“Yes,” she whispered, the intimacy of their conversation raw and welcomed to the normal sterile environment she lived and worked in.

“How foolish.”

Another smile, another prick of emotion in the swell of darkness they knew so well. His gaze left her face and traveled down her neck and chest to her breasts. Through the thin silk her pebbled nipples showed, the unmistakable shape drawing

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his masculine attention. The look on his face turned ravenous.

“When you wore your hair longer.”

“Yes,” she answered, her voice far too silky for her work. She rested her hand in the middle of his chest, her fingers settling over the flat disc of his nipple. “When I wore my hair longer.”

“Why did she ask you to cut it?”

“Easier to work,” she muttered.

“Is it?”

“No.”

“I miss the feel of it against my flesh,” he said softly, his eyes heavily lidded, nostrils flared. “When you would bend to look me over, it skimmed along me here...” He touched low on his belly, fingers grazing along the dark hair leading from chest to groin.

Absently, she reached up and touched her shoulder-length hair, wishing instead that she followed his hand down, past his belly button and beneath his waistband. But she couldn’t and it frustrated her.

“It’s out of the way now, isn’t it?”

They stared at one another for a long moment before she feared he’d reach up and skim his fingers along her skull, draw them closer than necessary, than safe.

“Nas, I think you’re—”

“Forgive me,” she whispered. The medicine meant to numb him had failed to keep him asleep for more than a few fleeting seconds. His throaty groan of protest assured her that he was well on his way to feeling the slash across his flesh.

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She cut through the dwindling thread at his lower rib, then turned for another curved needle.

“When do I fight next?” He twisted, straining against the stitches before apparently deciding it was futile. Black eyes squeezed shut, teeth clenched against a grunt.

“I don’t know,” she lied, knowing Turvo would send his slave into the arena tomorrow if he could walk.

“Where is...” Adeno paused and his eyes closed.

She glanced over her shoulder at the armor and weapons draped in black cloth, and shuddered. The leather arm belonged to Jetta, the man who had cut Adeno. His corpse lay somewhere within the basement while his head remained staked in the arena for all to see. When the remains had been jeered to the crowd’s satisfaction, it would be boiled and the skull returned to Adeno’s owner as a trophy.

Her heart wrenched in her chest. She remembered seeing Adeno and Jetta crouched together in the corridor as they awaited battle. She knew they had often exchanged meals, one man starving while the other ate before his fight. Cynically, she reminded herself that it would do no good to mourn this dead fighter. No one else had, no one else would.

“Did you see to him?” Adeno questioned.

“He was not mine to see,” she answered.

For a long while he stayed quiet, his shallow breathing the only sign of life. Encouraged by his silence, she placed several towels on the edge of her table and moved two large, crescent-shaped bowls from her work table to where Adeno lay. Hot, perfumed water continued to simmer over the modest fire in

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the corner of the closed-off room. She ladled enough into the bowls to wash his face and hair and properly clean the smaller wounds she had no more strength left to tend.

Water trickled from the soaked rag, and he watched her, his gaze intent on her balled fist.

“Close your eyes,” she murmured.

He didn’t speak, but he didn’t obey either, and without the will to argue with him, she dabbed at his chest with a beige-colored rag. Goose bumps rose along his upper arms and once flat nipples stood hard and erect.

“You’re cold,” she commented.

The lengthened bulge in his trousers told her otherwise. For half a moment she stared at the distraction and wondered if he displayed lust for her or the lingering excitement of battle. Men frequently died with stone-hard erections, the body’s answer to both desire and violence.

At last she tore her gaze away and found him studying her, his dark eyes heavily lidded. Shifting her weight, she leaned over him in order to reach the bowl of medicinal water. Her breasts hung over his face, nipples hardened with the sight of his erection, inviting his lips and teeth.

She swore she felt him lift his head, but once she realized the danger in their game, she took a step back and dunked a fresh rag into the water. In silence she scrubbed her fingers through his hair and massaged his scalp. His eyes finally closed, but the erection remained. He hunched his shoulders, relocated his arms until his hand lay across his hips and directed her eyes toward the unmistakable outline of his penis.

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With each stroke of her hands through his hair, he touched himself, slow and deliberate. She wondered if he realized that she completely ignored her duties in favor of his mesmerizing actions. Back and forth she rubbed her fingers through his hair, knuckles occasionally pressed to his scalp. Back and forth his outstretched hand moved over his trousers. She ached for him to caress her there, at the point now dripping wet with need.

“Would you care for a blanket?” she questioned.

He grunted a firm, “No.”

“Are you certain?” Her voice trembled with voyeuristic guilt.

“You’ll get the blanket wet.”

Embarrassed, she paused and wondered if he knew the effect his actions took on her. “No, I will not,” she answered firmly.

His eyes slit open. “You always grab blankets with your wet hands.” A sly smile tipped the corners of his mouth when he gazed up at her.

“Your hand is shaking. You must be freezing.”

“Is that what I feel?” he murmured, the tips of his long fingers sliding beneath the waistband of his trousers. “What do you feel?”

Danger had never enticed her. She pressed harder against his skull. “A lump,” she said irritably. “A massive lump on the side of your head.”

The muscles in his face tensed, but he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Both hands rested at his sides, his erection

still painfully obvious.

Her eyes flitted from the door to the table. Turvo had returned to his home, she assumed. Guards wouldn't disrupt her, and other Healers busied themselves with their own fighters. All she had to do was step closer and touch him, release him the way she'd always dreamed of. She wanted to know if his penis twitched when he was awake as it did when he was asleep and she examined him. She wanted to know the feel of his testicles in her hand while she stroked him, loved him the way she had wanted to from the moment she'd first seen his square face framed in dark waves of hair.

"Why do you heal me, Nasora?" he asked suddenly.

Emotion had always been worthless here. She placed her hand on his bare chest and attempted to slow the rhythm. So often he'd been brought to her with his heart racing, muscles tense, body aroused by fear and the rush of fight left in his blood.

She'd wanted to drape her arms over him, press his face to her neck, and run her fingers down his naked back as he filled her in one swift stroke. At night she dreamed of his muscular form, healthy after she'd placed her hands on his wounds and closed them with her life force. She envisioned his face cradled in her hands, his fingers pressed into the soft curve of her hips as he lifted and lowered her onto him. Sometimes she even saw their children, eyes pale gray like hers, hair midnight black like his. One tall, slender daughter and two broad-shouldered, muscular sons. The offspring of a former Healer and a slave warrior—the children who would never be born.

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“Iz cas mah desri, Nas,” he murmured in his native tongue. Only when his body succumbed to medicine did he speak to her in his old language. Like a drunk, he professed his longing and she listened, pretending to ignore the words she wanted to hear him say.

I want to make love to you, Nas.

“Iz cas tuh sui fezah.”

I want to touch your flesh.

“Ay sui tuh merot.”

And you to touch mine.

He pursed his lips briefly. “Nii mueri dina sui hana.”

“Instead I die under your hand.”

Eyes closed, mind struggling for clarity, she filled his torso with an energy block and hoped it would put him at ease.

* * *

Three days later, Adeno’s master scheduled him to fight in a celebration for the Emperor’s son and new bride. He stood with a chain around his neck and shackles at his ankles. Two guards, one with a club, the other holding his saber, stood in silence. The laceration to his side had nearly healed, the tender spot slathered in honey and wine, then covered with fresh linens to prevent infection. Each breath stung against the layers of leather and armor, though he’d long since realized pain was only a matter of mental tolerance.

He raised his chained arms to scratch his head. Six months ago, the man who had bought him had shaved his dark hair down to his skull to prevent lice. Despite that, fleas had

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infested him and he'd borne the reddened marks of a thousand tiny bites. The new owner had housed him beside exotic beasts until he'd won enough matches to earn his place with the other warriors.

"Quit moving," one of the guards snapped.

The chain around his neck rattled, pulled taut until he stumbled forward. Shafts of blindingly bright sunlight fought through the wooden slats separating his dark, tense world and the bloody, sun-soaked one that chanted his name.

He wrenched his torso and ripped the chain from his captor's hands.

"I move as I please."

The guards stared at him, weapons in hand, jaws slack. Adeno's heart raced as the iron gates raised and opened the arena with a rush of indistinguishable voices and a cloud of dust. He tore his saber from the guard's hand and stalked from darkness to light, hit first by the roar of the crowd, then by the hiss of a chain sailing through the air. Blood sprayed from his cheek, blinding his eyes. It took several heartbeats to realize the fight had begun.

Deft as a Marab cat, he crouched low and avoided the chain sailing above his head again. The crowd roared, and as he tested the weight of his saber, metal clashed against metal. A blow between the shoulder blades stole the air from his lungs and he stumbled, rolling into the dirt.

Twin warriors stood over him, one bearing a chain, the other a flail. His vision blurred, mind reeling as the two men stalked around him in opposite directions. He stepped

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backward in an attempt to keep both men within sight when the flail struck his helmet.

The arena floor surged upward—or did he fall? Dust gritted in his teeth, and just as he rolled to his back, a spear plunged into his arm pit, where the leather ended and no armor covered. Pinned to the ground, Adeno heard the crowd roar with pleasure. The only pleasure he'd ever known came from others, the only joy he'd ever heard accompanied torment.

"Finish him," they chanted, their voices now in unison, the pound of feet on wooden boards, fists on wooden seats. The arena shook with desire, with lust for pain and death.

"Dream," he heard Nasora whisper, a memory of long, soft fingers, of a warm breath on his face. Full breasts visible through sheer silk nearly touched his chest and abdomen as she leaned over him, her nipples protruding, needing his attention. "Far from here, Deno, dream of a different life."

In the twilight between consciousness and sleep, he'd considered what would happen if he reached up and caressed her cheek, how she'd react if he brushed his virgin fingers along the curve of her virgin breast. He found no pleasure in battle, but he knew, at least in sleep, that these desires brought him closer than he'd ever been to feeling content.

"Close your eyes," she beckoned softly. "And leave this place, Deno."

"Not without you, Nas," he murmured.

Footsteps shuffled toward him, and a man dressed in the skins of a leopard and the head of a Marab cat stalked back and forth, kept at bay by his owner's harsh words to stay his

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ground or have his head cut off. The crowd continued to taunt as men lifted Adeno's body from the arena's dirt floor, spear and all. He barely heard their demands of an execution.

"Dream," he whispered, dirt coating his tongue and lips. Like a cloak over his eyes, the world went dark.

* * *

Nasora sat in her small apartment and waited for nightfall, her stomach heavy and sick with worry. With a sigh, she tapped on a gold ornament hung on the canopy bed and watched it swing back and forth as candlelight glinted from the dark embedded jewels.

"No, Governess," she muttered under her breath. "Pretty things do not keep me as content as you believe."

Frustration had steadily built throughout the day as she paced her elaborate cage like an animal. Iriana, her wealthy governess, had made every attempt to keep her comfortable with offers of walks through the estate garden, but Nasora preferred solitude. The governess, an older, stern woman with flawless skin and dull eyes, enjoyed feeding the fish in her many ponds and the birds caged in the shade of stone archways and ancient flowering trees. For all its beauty, Nasora couldn't help but notice the high walls and the iron bars decorated with climbing ivy. Fragrant and soaked with midday sun, it remained an enclosed sanctuary lacking doors, lacking a way out.

At nightfall, she wished she'd accompanied Iriana if even for a brief stroll. She lay restless and hungry, taunted by the

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sweet, tender berries growing outside her window. A light, rain-scented breeze tickled the other ornaments and sent a wave of metallic laughter through her quarters, but it didn't drown out the sound of drums and cheers that overflowed from the basin-shaped arena.

"Are you alive or are you dead?" she whispered. Her muscles tensed, gut flipped. Shadows lengthened across the blue and gold rug; dark clouds visible through the opened window swept through the sky bruised with purple and shades of blue. "And if you live, do you dream, and if you dream, will you take me with you?"

Tonight ended a seven-day celebration to mark the arrival of the Emperor's son and young bride. In celebration, the lords had decided to feast and fight from the early light of dawn to the last drop of sunlight cast into the arena.

She reclined and ran her fingers along her neckline. The silk of her gown rustled with a gust of wind that rattled each ornament above her head. Golden cylinders, bronze and silver spirals whirled on thin strings, danced together, brushed one another in soft, accidental caresses.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and she heaved a deep, ragged sigh, unsure of whether she should pray for his life or swift death. Each day she feared her governess, his master, someone would realize the affection she held for him and she'd never see him again. Her life and skills—and her virginity—far outweighed his life. Boys could be stolen and turned into fighting slaves, but pure Healers were rarely found these days.

Mothers no longer waited forty, even fifty years before

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they bore their first child. Many women these days received the same education as their husbands. What payment they received to relinquish their newborn into the care of a governess seemed a small compensation for pregnancy, labor, and birth. None were guaranteed that their burden would result in a daughter born a Healer, an infant girl no man would ever touch—at least not until she could pass her skills to her own child born in the twilight of her life.

But she cared little for her coveted skills. She wanted, craved a man's callused hands stroking her breasts and belly, felt a tug in her empty womb when she thought of strong fingers parting her thighs, opening her for his thick cock to slide deep inside her.

Approaching footsteps stiffened her spine and stopped a shiver before it began.

"Nasora?" Her governess tapped on the door.

"Yes?" She sat up and straightened her gown.

"Turvo has come with six gold pieces. It is urgent."

"Whom does he seek to heal?" she questioned, though she already knew the answer. Sorrow engulfed her, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Adeno."

* * *

Nasora entered the dank innards of the arena, eyes flashing left and right at the empty cages of both men and beasts. She watched in silence as servants carried Adeno's body to her on a crimson-stained stretcher, and left him on a narrow table in

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the vacant corner.

“Oh, that greedy, miserable bastard,” she muttered loudly, hoping Turvo heard her curse him. She had known Adeno would not be ready to fight as his master had demanded. She’d felt it in her fingertips from the moment she’d roused him from his sleep and watched him stare up at her with listless eyes. He looked like the armor he wore—beaten, bent, and pounded into shape, but still empty and cold.

“How long has it been since you removed him from the arena?” she questioned the four men who had backed away.

Blank-eyed servants cast their gazes toward the floor. She guessed they’d come from Coraan and didn’t speak Miorian or Clenath—or they feared for their lives and wouldn’t risk a glance in her direction. Frustrated, she dipped her hands into warm, oily water and shook them dry.

“Leave,” she ordered, shooing them toward the door. “And tell the Quist he’ll be fortunate if this man lives to see daylight.” She slammed the door shut and turned back toward the slave warrior, who stared at the wall. “Oh, Adeno,” she whispered. “He should not have sent you out today.”

Shock had most likely set in when the guards had pulled him from the dirt, spear and all. With a frown, Nasora dipped a rag into a bowl of water and herbs, and mopped his chest around the wound. Once finished cleaning the injury, she positioned her right hand above the end of the spear. The tingle of warm energy jarred him, and she saw on his contorted face that he knew where he was and remembered what had happened.

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“No,” he whispered, his eyes wild, hands splayed on the edges of the table.

Ignoring him, she forced his head up and poured liquid from the etched bone flask at her side into his mouth.

“Calm yourself, Adeno.” She combed her fingers through his hair and supported his head to keep him from drowning. “I cannot—”

“Don’t heal me.”

“Turvo paid three times as much as usual,” she muttered. He’d spoken to her himself, rather than through her governess. Dark, intense eyes had stared through her, thin lips had curled into a cruel smile. Even the thought of his round face made her shiver. “He wants you alive.”

“Do you want what he wants?” The broken spear dug deeper with each labored breath, and his face, a mask of red dust and clay, blood and sweat, crumpled. “Do you want my life?”

“I want you to lie still.”

“Answer me.”

Unable to meet his eye, her gaze focused on the leather breast plate that had been cut from his body to expose his bruised chest. She held her palm before the shattered rod, and as she drew it back, the spear came free. His hands grasped the edges of the wooden table, a groan escaping through clenched teeth as the broken spear hovered over his body, suspended by energy that shot like bolts of lightning from her hand to the piece of smooth wood and iron. With her free hand she made circles close to his chest, so close that her palm caressed the

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dark covering of hair. His nipples hardened, and she knew he watched her. The harshness of his breath, the stiffness of his body, everything about him indicated that he no longer registered pain.

Nasora reached for a rag and washed away the blood before she prepared to drag her finger along his swollen flesh and seal the injury. "You are fortunate. The spear could have pierced your heart."

He grunted. "Cattle in a slaughterhouse fare better than I do. They only die once, not week after week."

She chose to ignore him and the trembling in her hand. Fist clenched, she summoned a ball of tight, white-hot energy and cauterized the wound, which made his back arch. His hips thrust upward, the unmistakable bulge strained against oiled leather trousers.

"Can you feel this?" Her fingers gently tapped his belly. As soon as the liquid from the flask numbed him, she'd cut through his leather trousers and examine the wound to his upper thigh.

"How much would it cost me for the silence of death?" he asked, gripping her arm. "Give me a price."

Nasora sighed, her eyes trained on his long, dirt-covered fingers. Powerful hands of an intense man, she thought, powerful and skilled. Her heart raced, but cowardice forced her to pull away. "You are only a slave. You do not have gold."

"I would starve a month if you would take my coin."

"It would be wasted."

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“No, not for the promise of leaving here.”

Her eyes squeezed shut to the burn of tears. “Turvo has paid,” she answered softly.

Rough fingers touched her cheek, brushed away hot, wet stains trailing from her eyes. “We pay for this, Nas, not him,” he murmured.

She barely realized he’d sat up until she heard a soft grunt of pain and felt his arms around her. Panic flooded her and she glanced around to be certain none of the servants remained.

“The door—”

“No, I don’t care.” He held her firmly, his arms like iron around her despite her struggles.

“Do you know what they would do to us?” She pressed against his chest, pushed and clawed at him in fear of being caught, in terror of her governess dismissing her—of the arena owners placing her in a Pit of Disgrace where she’d be stoned to death.

“I know what they do to us now.” He met her fear with passion and gripped her chin, drawing her face toward his. “We are slaves, Nas, slaves! Allowed nothing, spared no pain, shown no mercy.” He kissed her hard, one broad hand between her shoulders, the other firm against her buttocks.

“No, Deno, someone will see,” she said weakly, without an ounce of conviction as she kissed him back, her tongue searching for his, her hands groping his naked, newly replenished flesh. Heat radiated from her fingers, pleasure coiled deep inside her belly, within her empty womb as he kissed her throat and cupped her breast.

“Don’t fight me,” he murmured, thumb grazing her nipple. “Please, don’t you fight me.”

She sank into his embrace, her legs squeezed together as the tension and moisture pooled at the apex of her thighs. Ever since she’d first been assigned as his Healer, she knew it would be like this if ever he could touch her. Urgent yet tender, fierce yet passionate.

“I should lock the door,” she whispered.

“I’d rather be caught than be away from you.”

He teased her nipples through the thin silk of her dress, hot hands warming her both inside and out. With each roll, each tug of hard, aching flesh, another bolt of white-hot pleasure seared from the tip of her breast to the core of her belly.

Her body jerked slightly, toes curled in her leather sandals as he sucked low on her throat, on an area of flesh normally hidden by her high-neck gown. She hadn’t realized he’d loosened the silk ribbon at the back of her neck as he caressed her.

“I want to suckle you,” he requested, voice hoarse with desire.

She didn’t reply. Instead, she wriggled free of her long sleeves, the silky warmth of her dress replaced by hot hands and cool, moist air. Words lodged in her throat, and with her eyes closed, she slid her hands up and down his back, then along his muscular thighs as he kissed and licked his way to the curve of her exposed breast.

“We’ll be killed for this,” she reminded him.

“I would rather die knowing I touched you than never

ADENO

being allowed your smell, your sighs...everything about you, Nas."

Pleasure nearly overwhelmed her as he cupped her small, firm breast in the palm of his hand and studied her a moment, his thumb flicking her responsive nipple. Head turned to the side, he stroked her with his tongue and gave her ample space to watch him lick her, tease her with each fiery wet stroke of a pink tongue against a dark pink nipple.

She gripped a handful of his hair and drew his mouth to her breast, hungrily watching as he took the throbbing peak between his lips and sucked hard and soft, hard and soft. The weight low in her belly increased until she could have sworn someone had placed a hard, wet pebble between her legs. It ached, a fierce, needy sensation that she couldn't ignore.

"I want to feel you, too," she breathed as his tongue continued to strum pleasure into every vibrating nerve.

While he suckled her, she reached between their bodies and found the hard, thick length of his cock pressed against his belly. With years of healing behind her, she'd seen men naked before and felt no fear, only curiosity. She'd seen Adeno covered only in dirt and sweat, but it didn't compare to the feel of him.

She explored him through warm, pliant leather, but he didn't react to her fondling. Blindly she fumbled with the cord lacing up his trousers until his cock sprang free. Immediately she ran the palm of her hand over the crown. His own natural lubrication allowed her to glide along his soft flesh, which she desperately wanted to explore.

ADENO

Chains somewhere in the distance rattled, and Nasora jumped, fearful once more of discovery. Rather than allow her to escape, he embraced her tighter around the waist while his free hand slid down her back and along her sides.

“Nas, open your legs for me,” he murmured, lips teasing her sensitive earlobe, hand skimming down the small of her back. He traced a line down her buttocks until he stroked the back of her thighs. Almost without conscious thought, her legs inched apart, and at once thick fingers stroked wet heat. “I want to touch you everywhere.”

A shiver of expectation rattled down her spine. She gasped, found a torturous blend of both fear of being caught and the pleasure of her new discoveries.

“I want to touch you as well,” she said in his ear.

Again no reaction, physical or verbal. She dragged herself back and searched his face for answers.

“Nas.” He bent forward and attempted to kiss her again.

“Do you want me to touch you?” she questioned.

His gaze instantly faltered. “If you wish.”

“What do you wish?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” she argued.

“No, it does not.”

“Why?” she demanded, her face heated with more frustration than passion.

“Because I cannot feel your touch.”

Horror writhed in her heart. She followed his gaze to the emptied bone flask at the tableside and realized he couldn’t

feel her hands on him. It sickened her, repulsed her to think of each stroke, each caress giving him no pleasure—and it was because of her.

“The pain—” she started, but couldn’t possibly finish. Their eyes met, and she realized no matter how she numbed him, pain on a different level still existed.

“I know, Nas,” he murmured, fingers skimming down her spine in gentle strokes only she could feel. He kissed her shoulder, nuzzled her neck before he guided her arms through her sleeves and tied the back of her dress into place.

“It will wear off soon,” she offered, her fingers pressed into his back.

“Yes, I know. That is why I haven’t moved from the table. I fear I won’t be able to control my legs.” He’d already managed to lace the front of his trousers before she spoke. “And then what will happen? The wounds are healed by your hands, yet the discomfort remains. The numbness will ebb and I will not tolerate touch of any sort for days, perhaps weeks.”

Her hands balled behind his back as she held onto him, wishing he felt her against him. As if he realized what she needed, he kissed her full on the lips.

“Nas,” he whispered. “I felt that.”

She kissed him again and he groaned, his tongue pushing past her lips to enter her mouth. He stroked her hair, raked his fingers through her locks as he continued to kiss her. Nasora found herself fighting against rational thought that told her the deep bruises to his muscles and bones would ache in a matter of minutes. Once the medicine traveled through his

ADENO

bloodstream he'd feel each cut, even though it no longer physically existed on his body. Tenderness in muscles and bones became a side effect of her gift, which she often felt in her own body.

"Kneel beside me," he rasped, his hands already beneath her skirt. The calluses on the palm of his hands snagged her silk underclothes as he pushed them down to her knees. She climbed up beside him, mouth fitted to his, one hand in his hair, the other supporting her weight.

They lay on their sides, precariously perched on the narrow table. Nasora writhed to his probing fingers as he searched for soft, yielding flesh. He combed through the dark hair between her legs, teased the engorged pebble she'd never touched.

His muscles twitched, signaled the steady return of pain. She wanted to draw back, shift her weight and keep her leg from pressing into his hip and thigh, her arm and chest off his shoulder.

"I need to hold you," he said between kisses. "Even if I can't feel it, I want it."

"Then hurry," she begged him. "Before it's too late. Touch me, Deno, touch all of me."

Her spine curled, hips drawn forward and one leg carefully draped over his hip. One long finger traced her cleft in sweet, welcomed torture. In vain she attempted to slide him into her, but she'd already flexed herself forward with no place left to move.

"Oh, Deno," she sighed.

ADENO

His forehead glistened with perspiration, face glowed with sexuality and male mischief.

“For the rest of my life,” he murmured, “whether I die tomorrow, or next month, or in ten years, I want to remember exactly how you moved and sounded.”

Another soft moan accompanied the turn of his hand. His finger slid into her hot, tight pussy. She stifled a cry against his lips, wrapped her arms around him as he drew out and into her again. The momentum gave her a shiver as he thrust once more, another finger adding to the already tight fit. Her body jerked, the first wave of many leading to climax.

“Faster,” she begged him softly, afraid to command him. “Oh, please, faster.”

He did as she bade in stronger, faster strokes, pulling out of her completely only to plunge as deep as her body would allow. Shudders rippled through her belly, each one tightening the knot of pleasure. Thrust for thrust she met him, her hips rhythmically meeting his hand.

Another flex of his wrist and he pressed his thumb to her clitoris. Sensation overwhelmed her, unraveled her in surges of fiery pleasure. She convulsed around his three fingers buried deep inside of her, the walls of her pussy clenching him as it would have milked his cock of seed.

Beneath her he trembled, his face bone white and lips bloodless. He forced a smile and drew his fingers to his lips, licking off her essence and tasting her pleasure.

“I’ll numb you again.” She sat up and smoothed her skirt.

“No, Nas.” He struggled to sit upright and rake his fingers

ADENO

through her hair. "I want to touch you now."

"Then let me touch you as well."

She kissed him deeply and reached for the leather cord binding his trousers, but before she could free him, the door knob creaked. Her hand jerked away from his stiff cock, and she landed on the floor, her skirt falling around her ankles. The hinges groaned as the door swung open.

"Ah," said Turvo in his high, rat-like voice. "So he does live."

* * *

Nasora clasped her hands behind her back and cleared her throat. "Barely, Quist," she said.

The pig-faced owner tilted his layers of chins upward, and stepped into the room for better examination of his property. "He looks plenty alive to me."

"He should remain within the medical ward," she replied smoothly, surprised that the unsteady thump of her heart didn't distort her words. "The wound entered through his chest and out his back. Even with my careful ministrations, pain will grip him for quite some time."

The Quist raised a brow. "That is of little concern to me."

"It could take weeks before he's able..." To fight, to properly defend himself, to recover from even a minor blow. He wouldn't care about his slave's well-being. Gold dictated his life. "...able to win and earn you prizes."

"Weeks?" He frowned. "No, Nasora. I paid six gold, and my money will buy his performance the day after tomorrow."

ADENO

Her throat went dry as she inched closer and closer to the edge of panic. “Quist Turvo, it’s quite impossible to expect—”

“Tomorrow.” A single word sliced through hers. “Quist Magron has two knife-beaks—a mating pair imported from Calagron,” he said with a knowing smile, a thin-lipped grin of a man who had stood outside the door listening, waiting to emerge from his vermin’s hiding place and catch two lovers.

Sickness threatened, and Nasora lowered her gaze as an image of red-feathered birds the size of horses entered her mind. Despite their name, their claws were their deadliest weapon, and males fought until death for their female partners, which were always caged behind the slave warrior to entice an intense battle between man and avian.

Quist Turvo offered little more than a sporting execution.

“But he’ll die,” she muttered.

“Perhaps.” The same cruel smile, the same fleshy face. “Unless you have done your duty, Healer.”

She stiffened to the harsh, acidic tone of his laughter. Their eyes met briefly, but she stared past him once Adeno placed his hand at the small of her back. The muffled groan told her he’d regained his sense of touch.

“Adeno,” Turvo growled. “Return to your cell.”

* * *

Through the iron bars he crouched with his back to the damp wall, feet buried in straw, and waited. With his wrists resting on his knees, he listened to the slaves settle for the night in their narrow cells where they rested on cots better

suited for children. Birds screeched a hall away, giant cats growled and hissed as they paced the bars and licked their maws in bloodthirsty hunger.

In an attempt to loosen the knots in his muscles, he hunched his shoulders. With a grimace, he remembered his first night spent as a slave nine years ago. He recalled the wonder and relief he'd found in his own space, the dread that had come when he realized his father's cruel hand would never touch him again, but in its place were sabers and whips that never showed mercy. Having no desire for one last night filled with nightmares, he tilted his head back and licked his lips.

"You're no longer on me, Nas," he murmured weakly. The Yarin root he'd been forced to drink made his throat raw, which would prevent him from screaming in the arena. The slave masters had realized long ago that it disturbed patrons to hear terror accompany a blood bath. "No longer with me," he continued with the dreaded realization that the essence of her breast and lips had faded from his mouth.

Yet it had existed, he reminded himself, and her unique flavor belonged to him alone. Perhaps in twenty years another man would fondle her breasts, but he'd claimed her first, however briefly. Possessive male thoughts allowed a smile of satisfaction, but pain and regret quickly swallowed it up.

"But I want you. Now."

Each silky caress of her hand, the tight grip of long fingers around his cock, none of it had left an imprint on his mind. No matter how he'd touched her, he maintained his lowly place.

ADENO

Still a slave, still a prisoner, still a piece of property bought, sold, and destroyed.

With a growl of frustration, he pushed to his feet and stalked the width of his dark, musty cell. Need pulsed through him, invaded his blood like sweet poison. When he'd awakened upon her table, the spear still jutting from his chest, he'd promised himself he'd hold her once, only once. But now once wasn't enough, and perhaps a thousand times still wouldn't sate this sudden hunger, this awakening he'd found with her hands in his hair and his lips sucking her nipple, tongue laving her throat.

An iron door opened and shut, and he stood stock still in his cage, eyes trained on the cell bars. The torches along the wall flickered as a gust of urine-scented air wafted through the lower corridors.

"Deno."

Nasora spoke his name in barely a whisper, but she beckoned him to her. He stood, hands gripped tightly around the bars, and shook them hard to guide her forward. The men around him fell silent, their interest piqued by something soft and warm.

Footsteps cushioned by leather sandals padded along the stone and damp straw until she stood before him, her dark colored gown billowing around her, face pale as the moon he hadn't seen in nine years.

"Where are the keys?" she whispered.

He shook his hand and pointed at his throat. "Turvo," he rasped.

ADENO

With a frown, she wriggled her hand through the rusty bars where it stopped at her elbow. Bowing, he drew her fingers to his lips and closed his eyes. The scent of her perfumed skin filled his lungs, lifted him momentarily from his prison cell and nestled him in her grasp.

“How?” he questioned, the single word almost indiscernible.

“I walked here,” she answered. “Eleven streets.” She smiled faintly and clutched his hand. “My governess sleeps deeply. She didn’t wake when I climbed through the window and landed in the bushes.”

“No,” he said. If his voice still existed, he would have told her to return home. Agony burrowed into his heart as he thought of someone discovering her here, now.

“I won’t let him kill you,” she promised.

He reached through the bars and touched her cheek and chin, ran his finger along her lips. With his eyes trained on hers, he caressed her, promised her a night spent far away from this place. Bodies naked and trembling, hair dampened with the rain like sugary mist on the meadows as they lay together, joined as they both craved. He looked her over, imagined his hands cupping her hips, thought of his fingers tangled in her hair grown long once more. Immediately his gaze focused on her belly and the empty womb he wished to fill. He needed her more than ever on the eve of his death, but more than need, he loved her and feared for her.

“Don’t die,” he forced himself to say. He squeezed her hand harder than necessary. “Nas, don’t die for me.”

ADENO

“Deno—”

“It’s not worth it.”

She squeezed his hand, then pulled away. “You think it is worth living if I see you die?”

Helpless behind the bars, he watched her pad away, a phantom in a billow of dark silk.

* * *

Every nerve in her body burned with urgency. While she’d crept down the halls, she’d heard several of the slave masters discussing the tournaments scheduled for the following afternoon. With the masters preoccupied, she needed stealth and courage to slink through darkness in search of forgotten or misplaced keys.

Prisoners rattled their iron bars, and twice she’d barely moved in time to avoid a rock thrown in her direction. Taunts and unsavory words went unnoticed as she lifted cloaks hung on the wall pegs and turned up nothing more than hats and empty scabbards.

She neared the end of the hall when keys jingled, and a man hawked and spit. Back against the wall, she froze, her eyes wide and owlish with terror. A gray-haired man with drooping jowls and sagging eyes took no notice of her presence. He yanked his trousers down past his hips, turned away from her, and urinated in the corner.

Her nose wrinkled despite the heavy odor already in the room, and she stepped farther into shadows until he finished his business and lumbered away. Once he bumped from sight,

ADENO

she released a breath and stepped forward.

A hand reeled her back.

“Nasora?”

The whine in his voice gave him away. She shivered and ducked away from his grasp before she greeted him. “Quist Turvo.”

“What is this...pleasure?” He licked his lips and eyed her breasts.

“I worried for Jaq. Quist Bour said his foot had not healed yet, and I thought I should see to it—”

“Quist Bour keeps his men in the west wing. Why do you search my holdings?”

Her shoulders dropped, mouth dry with truth. “Adeno is not ready to fight, Quist Turvo. Please, you must give him more time.”

The Quist strolled away, his gaze telling her she should follow. “He doesn’t need more time, Healer. He is worthless.” Turvo growled. “I should never have paid you. Six gold and for what?”

“You have fought him too hard,” she answered softly, attempting to force her disgust aside. “I could do nothing more, at least not without ample time.”

“Time,” Turvo snickered.

* * *

“Yes, Quist, more time.”

Adeno’s gut tightened, and he shivered at the sound of Nasora’s voice.

ADENO

“His time is over. He has used up his glory. Most of them do when they fight in his reckless style.”

“Then set him free. Show your gratitude of a good show and much gold earned. Truly it’s a small price to pay.”

His owner chuckled. “Gratitude? I will show my gratitude. I will make him a legend tomorrow. Imagine it, Nasora, one man against two knife-beaks. The female, I’ve heard, has eggs. Both parents will fight for their unborn chicks, and once Adeno is gone they will destroy nine other men. Then, at the end of the day, we feast on their eggs.”

“You will execute all of them.”

“One final moment of glory.”

“Why not sell Adeno? You could make quite a profit.”

“He is not worth twenty gold now. The rest of the Quists wagered he’d last fifteen minutes, but I doubt he’ll stand more than five.”

“He is Adeno. Even if he has one fight left in him, any man here would pay you fifty, sixty gold just to say they owned him.”

“And there are a hundred men who would pay twenty gold each to see him fight to his honorable death.”

Two shadows stood against the far wall, one round, the other long and lean. Nasora stood with her arms crossed, her body still as a statue in Turvo’s presence. She’d always despised the slave master, even before she’d come into employment as his Healer.

“Please.” She took a step forward, her arms extended in truce. “Show him mercy. Release him.”

ADENO

“To whom do you suggest I release him?”

Nasora hesitated. “My governess seeks a laborer,” she said, voice quavering. “Sell him to her for five gold and I shall give you my profits for the next year.”

Long silence followed, and Adeno crept closer to the bars, afraid he would miss a whisper drowned out by his labored breaths. Freedom, life...dreams lay beyond the cold bars his hands tightly grasped. Nasora stood beyond his cage.

“You stupid, stupid girl,” Turvo spit. “Stupid girl with foolish thoughts.”

She cowered. “I beg your pardon?”

Another cold laugh. “Why, you’ve just given me the warrant for your death.”

“I ask for mercy, Quist Turvo. He’s fought well for you, show compassion—”

“Mercy and compassion, eh? No, you do not seek mercy for Adeno.”

“Of course I do.”

“Your hair smells of a feral, violent fuck,” he replied. The larger shadow stalked forward and grabbed hold of the fragile one. With a yelp, Nasora fought to free herself, but Turvo clutched her hair in his fist and whipped her toward the wall. She slammed against stone, body sprawled on impact before she sank to the ground. “You do not know the true meaning of a feral, violent fuck.”

Adeno heard the crack of flesh upon flesh followed by a muffled sob. He pulled on the cell bars, but he couldn’t issue even a shout of outrage. His presence remained silent and

ADENO

passive.

“How did he take you, hmm? While he lay on the table with his cock stiff in the air? Did you ride him, little girl? Milk the seed from him and guarantee your death?”

“No,” she whimpered. “We haven’t—”

Another slap across the face. Adeno’s heart raced, the desire to draw a weapon pulsed through his veins as her crumpled shadow crawled across the stone floor. His eyes stared hard at the saber hanging opposite his cell, the jeweled hilt and scabbard gleaming in the torch light.

“Lift your skirt if you wish to know the true meaning of a man,” Turvo growled.

“I would rather die than touch you,” she answered through her teeth. “You hideous, beastly excuse of a man.”

“For years I’ve wanted to teach you a lesson, you ignorant little bitch. All this time, day after day, you’ve turned your back to me as I spoke. Now the only time you’ll turn from me is when I tell you to face away so I may fuck you hard from behind. Hard and merciless, until you scream for me to stop.”

She turned her face away from him. The iron door creaked open once more, and a child’s shadow stood behind Turvo before he could grab her again.

“Quist,” a meek child’s voice requested. Turvo’s hand lowered to his side. “Forgive me, but Mortego seeks a Healer. He needs Nasora at once.”

Turvo heaved a breath and spit on the ground. “You find only ruin here, child.”

Without question, the boy left at once, the door slamming

ADENO

behind him.

"I will tell my governess if you so much as touch me," Nasora warned.

"You will not see Governess Iriana, Nasora. She abandoned you once she realized you'd escaped from her home on this futile tryst." Cold, thick silence filled the prison cells as though each man awaiting battle had stopped breathing in order to hear the Quist speak. "No woman of honor wishes to harbor an untrustworthy whore of a girl."

"You've—you've lied to her."

"I told her what I saw."

"You saw nothing. We haven't done anything."

"I witnessed enough." He chuckled again. "While Adeno dies before a crowd, I swear to you, Nasora, I shall be the first to throw a stone at your skull."

"My energy remains. I am still...able," she finished lamely, her voice hushed and filled with pain.

"Not for long, slave," Turvo replied.

"I'll kill you," Adeno said, his voice strengthened by anger. "I'll kill you if you touch her." He slammed his fist into the iron bar and heard the door open and slam shut.

Only rats remained.

* * *

Nasora didn't bother to heal herself of the bloodied nose Turvo had given her. She wiped her face with her sleeve as she walked to her station, numb and terrified, and found her assignment still as stone upon her table. His skin appeared

ADENO

green with death, his body already showing signs of decay.

An ax stood propped up against the table's leg on its wedge-shaped blade, and a sword sheathed in gauze lay against the nameless man's chest. Two guards lingered near the door, their heads bowed, bodies bent.

"I cannot raise the dead. Remove him at once."

She watched them lift the gurney, and before she thought to follow them, the heavy wooden door slammed shut, the bolt locked into place.

A trap. She searched her confines and noticed shackles hung from the wall and a strip of cloth beside it, the tools to leave her bound and gagged.

Panicked, she threw herself against the barrier and hit her fists hard against the sound-proof wood. Twice she rammed her shoulder into the hard surface. Twice she delivered herself to the brink of tears.

Slumped on the ground, she caught sight of the ax and forced herself to stand. If she could lift the weapon, she could break the lock.

"I am not a slave," she told the rats as she wrapped her hands around the crudely hewn ax. Anger fueled strength, and her first blow missed the lock and lodged the blade into the wood. Teeth gritted, she strained until she pulled it free. The iron blade clattered to the ground and chipped a piece of the stone floor, but she hefted it again and grunted beneath its weight. With her shoulders burning in fatigue, she tried again.

Metal hit metal, and a spark of fire hissed from the colliding surfaces. Not broken completely, but damaged. She

ADENO

smiled and dropped the ax in favor of the sword, which she used to pry at the lock until it twisted and gave with a creak protest.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she clutched the sword tightly for protection and kept her body low, defensive. Every sound within the prison now seemed foreign and threatening. She paused before doorways before at last bolting forward, heart in her throat, feet barely touching the ground.

For a brief moment she lost her way and lingered in the middle of an empty corridor. With the aid of torchlight she allowed her gaze to dart left and right until she heard the distant call of birds and knew she'd nearly reached the tunnel leading to the arena.

Frantically, she doubled back the way she'd come and darted through corridors, making her way south and east until the air smelled more of male than of beasts. The weight of the sword threatened to drag her down, but she refused to abandon her only defense. The moment Turvo realized she had escaped, he'd send guards to fetch her. With reason enough to kill her, they would not hesitate to rape her repeatedly before slitting her throat or tossing her into a pit.

At last she found her way to Adeno's corner of the prison. She walked past cell after cell, hands groping for the slightest touch of her gown and hair. Already her first venture into the arena's underbelly escaped her mind, and she wondered if she'd walked too far.

"Adeno?" she questioned.

None of the dirty faces answered her. She continued until

ADENO

the meager light revealed a cage door ajar at the end of the hall. Her pace stuttered, heart tattooed a wary rhythm in her chest.

They could have taken him already, sent him to fight the birds in order to test their strength.

“No,” she begged the darkness. “Oh, please, no.”

The sword’s blade scraped the ground, dragged behind her as she forced herself to trudge forward. A rat scurried over her foot, which she ignored once she noticed the dark spots leading out the hall door. For a moment she considered following the trail, but she noticed his weapons remained on the peg.

“Deno?” she whispered, creeping steadily forward.

A lump lay in the back of the cell, its breaths wet and shallow. The form trembled, the only movement of crumpled darkness. Her eyes strained to pull the shadows away, and as she widened her eyes, another figure became discernable in the gloom.

A pudgy hand raised and crashed down. The lump quivered, the hidden chains at both ends pulled taut.

“Do you feel it burn in your lungs or shall I stab you again? She was to be mine, but you’ve used her up. Rest assured I am not concerned. Now I will take her and rip her inside and out while you bleed to death here, in your cell. Think of me as your life slips away, think of everything you wanted to do to her and how I’ll do it harder, without a shred of mercy. Think of how she’ll cry against her binds and beg for you to save her. Think of it, Adeno, think of how worthless

ADENO

and pathetic you've become."

Adeno grunted, voice muted by the Yarin root. He raised his bound hands as though to shield himself from another blow, but the knife in Turvo's hands came down and jabbed at him. Cloth provided no barrier to iron, and with a strangled scream he violently wrenched back and forth.

Eyes burning with unshed tears, Nasora stalked forward, the heavy blade no longer a burden in her grasp. She drew it up above her head, determined to end this once and for all.

"I am no slave," she said, her voice low and control. She waited, her patience waning as he turned to face her. Piggy eyes bulged, thin lips formed a crooked expression of surprise before the sword's tip thrust deep into his neck. "And neither is Adeno."

She didn't watch his body tumble or hands grasp the hilt in a worthless attempt to free himself from certain death. Falling to her knees, she rubbed her palms together. Sparks of blue-white light shot from her fingers and the sides of her hands. She groped for Adeno's blood-soaked shirt, ran her hands desperately over his slick chest.

He struggled to sit up against his bindings, fought to breathe despite the hole ripped into his lungs.

"Deno, don't move," she pleaded. Bent at the waist, she kissed his cheeks, touched her mouth to his damp brow. "Conserve your strength."

"Leave me," he murmured.

"I promised I would heal you."

"It's too late. Go, Nas, before they find you here."

ADENO

At first she didn't know what he meant. The static energy in her hands snapped and pulsed, but as she grew weaker, she heard footsteps and loud voices. Men shouted, metal scraped metal, and bright torchlight filled the cage.

A line of men entered and fanned out, their unfamiliar faces grim. Nasora pressed harder to Adeno's chest, leaked the rest of her strength into the deep, unclean wounds. A woman pushed past the throng of men and stood before Nasora, her flawless skin flushed.

"Nasora?" her governess gasped.

Energy sputtered through her fingertips, the last drops of healing failed to close the wound to his neck.

"Iriana," Nasora cried. "Please, please don't take me until I know if he's saved."

Her governess ignored her words. "Step aside, child. Your work here is done."

"No," she begged, shielding Adeno's dying body. "No, I won't leave him. I promised him."

"I said step aside," Iriana commanded. Full skirts glided across stone and rustled through straw.

Two men forced Nasora to her feet and dragged her dead weight through the open cell door. She fought until it hurt to breathe and her energy fizzled in her fingertips. She barely noticed the carriage and horses outside the arena entrance, barely realized the men slapped the horses and returned her to the ivy-covered estate. The dawn stained her memory, blazing red like the blood on her gown and beneath her fingernails. With nothing else to do, she wept, grieved for herself and her

ADENO

loneliness, and celebrated the dreams Adeno would have again.

“Dream,” she said as her face sank into her silken pillow. Tears damped her matted hair and the soft, cool bedding. Outside the winds turned cold, the scent hinting at a storm she hoped would churn the sky with violence. “If you’re gone, then dream, but I beg of you not to dream of me.”

* * *

Steam rose from the perfect, glassy surface of an overfilled bath. The early morning sun shimmered, a warm breeze scenting the room with hints of lavender.

Nasora cast her gaze around her chamber, knowing she would never see this place again. By nightfall, Iriana’s coachmen would deliver her north, over the great pass and out of South Clenath’s strangling grasp.

Her governess had a brother who would see Nasora safely aboard one of his ships. From there, she dictated her own path and consequences, though Iriana promised her dear brother would encourage her toward Coraan, the land ruled by Fae.

“The Lady of the Fae will welcome your energy there,” Iriana had promised.

But hesitation continued to tug at her. In body she remained whole, but part of her had withered, and she didn’t think she’d survive anywhere. It seemed so long since she’d known anything but the arena that the thought of venturing even into a peaceful land frightened her.

“It was not your fault,” her governess said softly, her voice

ADENO

an unexpected but welcomed distraction.

Nasora didn't bother to turn and face the former Healer. With her robe slipping from her shoulders, she dropped flower petals into her bath and disturbed the water's surface. She grimaced, her fingertips still tender from her sapped strength.

Five nights ago, she'd pushed herself harder than ever before, put all of her life into Adeno's until the guards had dragged her away in a heap of sobs and screams. Driven by passion, she had not prepared herself for the lightning force of her energy, which had left her branded with bone-deep burns.

"I should have found him sooner," she said under her breath.

"You should not have been in the arena at all."

"Perhaps then I would have allowed him the death he wanted for years."

"Give yourself time, Nasora," Iriana gently instructed. "He was property, but even the masters are required to care for their slaves. That is the sole purpose behind Healers, to keep the slaves healthy."

"But we don't. We bring them suffering."

"There is no need to argue. Sometimes I wake in the middle of night and swear I smell blood on my bed sheets."

With a shudder, Nasora merely nodded.

"You were brave, my dear. If you had not stolen away to find him, no one would have known that Quist Turvo killed Adeno himself. And if you hadn't put a sword through him, he would have been stoned for the mistreatment of his property."

Nasora burned with anger despite the truth in Iriana's

ADENO

words. No matter what, Adeno bore the title of a slave, not a man. His life held as much worth as a calf meant for slaughter, and just as a farmer held responsibility to nourish his stock, a slave master was required to feed and care for his slaves.

“That brings me no consolation,” she muttered.

“And it shouldn’t, but that is the nature of the Clenathians. What you did was foolish, but commendable. Most acts of bravery are, Nasora. You are fortunate I have lived here all my life and have earned the respect of this community. No other governess could have pleaded on your behalf with success of earning your pardon.”

No other governess had the funds to speak on her behalf, Nasora thought ruefully.

From the mirror hung on the wall over the bath, she watched Iriana. Her governess stood almost unnoticed in the arch doorway; a blue-black bird perched on a stand as it pecked seeds and dried fruit from her palm.

“In time,” Iriana continued, “you will find peace.”

“I do not need time,” she answered morosely. Time equaled opportunities to think of how she should have run faster, how she shouldn’t have lost her way. Time proved an enemy, a lingering assailant that chopped through her with every slice of the pendulum.

“His name was Edion and he died in a fight against two men almost thirty-six years ago. When my governess realized my feelings for him, she refused to let me wander from her gaze. I heard him die while I sat in my chamber. With his last cries I swore no girl beneath my roof would suffer as I did. If I

ADENO

had known..."

Nasora pressed her eyes shut, heart breaking for her governess. "I had no idea, Governess. I'm sorry."

"So am I," Iriana replied. "You have a long journey ahead of you. Enjoy your bath and do try to rest. It does you little good to push yourself."

The door rustled over a thick woolen carpet and clicked shut. Nasora took a breath.

"She's right, you know."

Her eyes fluttered open and found Adeno awake in her bed, long legs stretched out, head resting on a decorative silk pillow. He smiled, his skin still pale with physical pain, but his eyes appeared more alive than she'd ever seen before.

"You shouldn't push yourself," he continued. "I'd rather you gave me the privilege of harassing you."

"As you're good at." Her smile widened. She skittered toward him and perched herself on the edge of the bed. "When did you wake?"

"Apparently just in time to watch you bathe," he answered, his fingers lacing with hers. Surprisingly, his touch proved tolerable, the pads of her fingers resting comfortably against his knuckles.

She followed his gaze, which had settled on her partially exposed breasts. Through the sheer silk he could easily see each curve of her body from the swell of her hips to the pebbled outline of her full breasts, which was exactly what she wanted him to see the moment he woke.

"When will you leave?" he questioned.

ADENO

“Before nightfall.”

He grunted. They both knew he was in no condition to leave South Clenath for several more days. Perhaps he would follow her when he'd recovered, or perhaps he'd search for his family and hope that a cousin or brother would welcome him home. Iriana had bought his freedom. He could travel as he wished without the worry of another master enslaving him.

“I thought you were bathing,” he said.

“I was.”

He lifted a brow as though in question of her robe.

“Adeno,” she admonished.

“You should not have offered me the intimacy of your chamber if you didn't want me to watch you.”

She cocked her head to the side and folded her arms, purposely hiding her breasts from his sight. “You need your rest in order to recover,” she murmured, her voice silky and soft.

“Rest has sustained me, Nas,” he said, his tone a feral growl of need. “I want you to do more than sustain me.”

Her forearms grazed her nipples, but she didn't know if the light friction or his words turned them into tight knots. Unfolding her arms, she knelt over him, brushed her lips to his and ran her fingers through the dark waves of his hair.

“Tell me what you want,” she breathed in his ear.

His cock jumped up instantly, the length of him hard against her hand. She caressed him through the soft linen of his loose-fitting trousers. With a trembling hand, he stroked her thigh, long fingers stretching to cover more flesh as he

ADENO

rounded the cleft of her buttocks and found her already damp with expectation.

Together they moaned and shifted, both relying on their instincts to guide them through the awkwardness of an unfamiliar lover.

"I'm sorry," he said between kisses, his hips moving urgently with each stroke of her hand.

"Me, too." She chuckled.

He circled around her tight opening, teased her with his fingers. She groaned, finally able to voice her pleasure without fear of being caught in his arms. He smiled up at her, brought his hand to his mouth and sucked her essence from his finger. "I want to drink from you."

They exchanged positions and he moved her robe aside in order to see her fully. She watched the fire in his dark eyes roil, watched him lick his lips in expectation. Her worries for his health immediately vanished once he touched his hot, damp lips to her inner thigh and sucked. At once her back arched to his caresses, her feet planted on the bed to draw her hips up.

"Tell me you want me to touch you," he said, his breath hot between her legs.

"I want you to touch me," she murmured.

"How?"

Her fingers grasped a handful of his hair. "In whatever way makes you need me most, Deno."

At her words, he laved her thigh in dizzying ecstasy. "I don't think I could want you more than I do right now."

ADENO

Every nerve tingled, and she writhed as he kissed the cleft between her legs and rubbed her first with his fingers, then with his tongue. A whimper escaped, an encouraging, small sound of complete pleasure. He inhaled, drawing the scent of her arousal into his lungs before he tasted her.

She moaned louder than before, her hands finding his shoulders. She kneaded his taut muscles, wanted to beg him to enter her, but she couldn't utter more than a mewling sound of pleasure.

His lips found her clitoris, tongue circled smooth, hard flesh. Her belly grew tight, the pleasure building from gentle waves to a stronger, more fulfilling throb. His thick fingers teased her swollen labia, and she bore down until the tips filled her.

"Oh, Deno. Please."

"You're greedy," he murmured, kissing, tasting her with each flick of his tongue.

"I need you." She pushed his fingers deeper, felt him twist slightly to give her even greater sensation. A moan became a cry of needed release. "I need you inside of me. Now."

He thrust harder, faster until she could no longer hold back. Another cry filled the room and she convulsed with release, her hips quivering, her clitoris pulsing in swift rhythm to his touch.

Together they stilled and he kissed the inside of her thigh while his hand stroked her belly. Waves still filled her for long moments until she regained her senses and pulled him close. Her hand reached between their bodies, sliding past his

ADENO

waistband. Fingers tangled in the dark hair surrounding his stiff cock, she grasped him.

“I need to feel all of you inside of me.”

Together they breathed and laughed as he struggled to remove his loose-fitting trousers and unbutton the shirt that hung over his shoulders. He rolled on top of her and kissed her forehead.

“Are you certain?” he asked. His hips pressed to hers as though he could barely stand to hear her deny him. “Are you absolutely certain you wish to bear the weight of my body atop yours, to harbor me within you?”

She placed her hand to his cheek and nodded, wanting nothing more than to feel him buried to the hilt, to feel the pulse of his cock clenched tightly within her.

“I will destroy you,” he said, his voice thick with pain.

“You haven’t the weakness in your heart to destroy me, Adeno.”

He kissed her bruised fingertips. “I will take it away from you, your energy, the light in your hands.”

“I offer myself to you freely. I shall never return here again, and I have no desire to pass this energy to my child. It’s a curse to me, a chain to bind me here.”

He kissed her fiercely, lips locked to hers before she’d finished speaking. Her fingers dug into his back, immediately finding the star-shaped wound left by his master’s blade, the one that had sunk through his lungs. She traced the scar half-mindfully, deliciously distracted by his teeth nibbling her ear and his apologies as he fumbled to shake off his trousers,

which had bunched around his ankles.

Gently, she caressed his ears, ran her fingers through his mess of dark hair. His tongue thrust hard into her mouth as he placed one hand beneath her buttocks, and entered her in one swift, tantalizing stroke.

Her cry of surprise filled his mouth and he continued to apologize, afraid he'd harmed her, afraid she'd ask him to stop when he couldn't imagine being without her.

"You haven't harmed me," she assured him, her fingers trailing the length of his spine. His hips moved against hers, pulled the length of him nearly out before he thrust into her again. "Oh, you feel bigger than I had ever imagined."

Strong hands gripped her, held her as he filled her with each controlled stroke. She drew her knees up and out until his pubic bone rubbed against her clitoris and built up the potential for another climax.

"Tell me what you want, Nas," he murmured in her ear, hand running up down her leg.

"I only want you," she answered breathlessly, clawing at him, needing every inch of him to fill her.

"Iz cas mah desri, Nas." I want to make love to you, Nas. He buried his face in her neck and whispered words to her in his native language. She understood exactly what he said as he pumped her, gripped her, and drew her as close as possible.

"I've loved you since the moment I first saw you, I've wanted to take you from this place longer than you could have imagined, and I've dreamed of making love to you each night since the moment you first placed your hand on my chest," he

continued.

“You do make love to me,” she whispered in his ear. “But I don’t want you to make love to me. I want you to fuck me until you’re satisfied and breathless.”

He thrust harder, his dark eyes blazing with the desire to please her. Head bent, he took her nipple into his mouth and bit her, teeth nibbling hard enough to draw a yelp of half pleasure, half pain from her. She tossed her head back and squeezed her eyes shut, marveling in the feel of his male form.

“Just like that,” she said, wanting him to drown out all sound with his grunts and sighs, wanting to feel nothing but his warmth and the thickness and length of his shaft buried deep inside her tight, wet pussy.

In his native tongue, she whispered to him, “Come inside of me, Deno. I want you, all of you.”

He pushed her leg farther up, their bodies at a slightly different angle. She sucked in a wild breath, unprepared for the difference in the sensation, how *deep* he felt, how he stretched her farther than she thought possible.

She gasped and mewed in pleasure, clung to him as his tight balls slapped against her buttocks with each thrust. With his teeth gritted, his hips pounded into her. Perspiration beaded on his forehead and she reached up to smooth his hair from his face.

Unexpectedly, she quavered beneath him, ripples of pleasure filling her from head to toe. In the throes of her climax he came as well, groaning as he lowered her leg and settled deep within her.

ADENO

They lay tangled, bodies covered in the sheen of sweat and the perfume of sex on the sheets and their flesh. Rolling onto their sides, he lay against her, her back to his chest, his arms cradling her.

Warm, moist breaths tickled the back of her neck, and his seed made the insides of her thighs slick and hot. The sensation sent an unexpected thrill racing through her blood.

"It will be better next time," he offered, his voice hinting at an apology.

She reached behind and stroked his cheek, feeling his skin warm and smooth as always. "I think it was perfect now."

He made no reply, but his hands tightened around her, his open palm resting against the slight rise of her womb against her flat belly. She settled her fingers over his and closed her eyes, wondering if she remained empty still.

"I'm afraid your bathwater has gone cold," he murmured when she'd almost fallen asleep.

She peered at the tub and saw wisps of steam travel off the surface like tiny, reluctant ghosts. A smile touched her lips and she grasped his hand, intrigued by the thought of her body weightless in water and him filling her again. This time, she wished to mount him and watch as he reclined beneath her.

"Come on," she beckoned. "It's not gone cold yet."

He grunted again, paying little mind to words when he had her naked and dancing before him. With his cock swollen, the crown bearing a small bead of lubrication, he didn't need to say a word of his decision.

While she pulled her hair up into a knot, he walked up

ADENO

from behind and wrapped her in his tight embrace.

“Bathe with me,” she whispered.

He sloshed into the water first and helped her to stand before him. Water cascaded down the overfilled sides and spread like a thin, glassy lake across the marble floor.

Together they eased into the water and knelt in the oval-shaped tub. She spread her legs and straddled him as he lay back and drew circles in the water with his fingers.

“Swear to me, Nas,” he said, his voice harsh and commanding. Unexpectedly he pulled her as close as he could without pressing the wind from her lungs. “Swear to me that you’ll stay tonight and we’ll leave tomorrow. Together.”

“You’re not strong enough yet.” She paused, swallowed back the choke of grief. “And I cannot do anything to lessen your pain.”

“You have done it already.” His lips brushed against her hair, damp fingers trailed down her spine. “I need to hear you say it. Swear to me you’ll wait until first light.”

She smiled and eased against his body, warmth resonating between their joined forms. The stiffness of his cock sought yielding flesh and she lowered slowly onto his erection.

Hands on his chest, she made love to him slowly, comforted by the beat of his heart against her open palms and the waves of water that aided her weightlessness. Large hands cupped her breasts, and he fit his mouth around her nipple, sucking with the tenderness of a gentle lover.

Their eyes met, and shy glances turned to deep, locked gazes. Fingers linked, lips touched, breaths exchanged with

each stroke of him deeper and deeper between her legs.

“Nas.” His voice emerged strained, urgent with the need for release. Back arched, she shuddered and he shuddered with her, the warmth of his seed spreading deep within her.

She swept the dark hair from his eyes and kissed the perspiration from his forehead. “You were correct, Deno.” Chest heaving, he gave her a quizzical look, which made her smile. “Better the second time.”

“Wait until the third, when I have more stamina.” Tightness formed creases around his eyes, and he struggled to maintain his smile of satisfaction. “Nas, you never answered me. Will you stay?”

“Deno.” Her hand grasped his and drew it between them until she rested his palm on her belly. The emptiness ebbed, though she couldn’t explain why she felt certain of this. “Yes, yes I’ll wait. We leave. Together,” she promised.

His eyes twinkled with onyx light and the dawning of comprehension. With a close-lipped smile, he rested his forehead on her shoulder and grasped her hand. A ragged sigh escaped his lips and tickled her bare flesh, a sound of disbelief and elation.

Tears filled her eyes and she grasped him tightly, afraid to release him, afraid to ever be away from him. All she could think of was the mist and the mountains, of land without walls and iron bars.

“Together,” she said aloud to assure herself.

“You still heal me, Nas.”

GABRINA GARZA

Mom, crazy person, and animal rescuer. That's the gist of it. A native of the Chicago suburbs, Gabriela Garza writes to get out of doing the dishes. When she's not writing or dodging household duties, she's either embarrassing her children in public or walking her foster dogs, of which she has way too many. Check out her website for all you never wanted to know: www.gabrina.com.

* * *

***Don't miss Sex Between Strangers, by Gabriela Garza,
available at AmberHeat.com!***

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