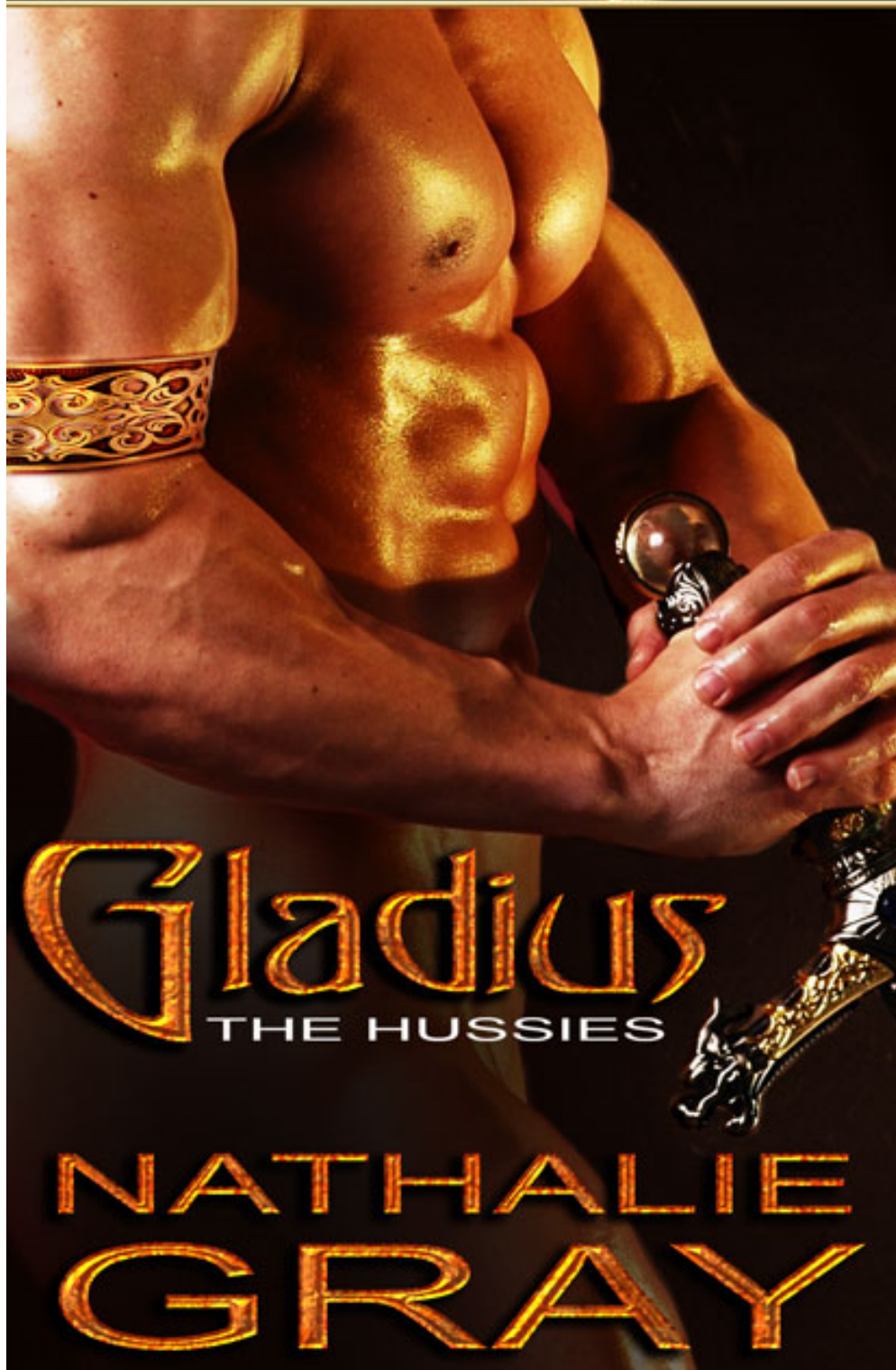


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



# Gladius

THE HUSSIES

NATHALIE  
GRAY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gladius

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# ***GLADIUS***

**Nathalie Gray**

## Prologue

Myth, magic or legend? There have been Hussies since before time was measured in days and minutes. Women who fought bravely alongside their mates with sword and axe, warriors whose courage changed the world around them. Led by the first Hussy, Danu, these fierce fighters discovered their inner strengths, summoned reserves they didn't know they possessed and passed into the fabric of legend with their daring exploits.

Since that time, myths have been spun around the Hussy Warriors—tales told by firelight, whispered from mother to daughter—eventually to take their place amongst the mystical fables that shape our souls.

But the essence of a Hussy remains strong in the hearts of so many women. Heroines who don't realize that within them lies the power to make a difference, to effect change, to use their passion every bit as skillfully as Danu wielded her sword so long ago. Warriors in different times and different places, who love as deeply and desire as desperately as any woman ever has, seldom knowing that their desire will impact not just one man, but so much more.

Therein lies the magic of a Hussy. To right a wrong, turn a frown to a smile—to positively change those around her. To love a man with every fiber of her body, to learn from that love and to grow stronger because of it.

Whether in the past, the future, or the here-and-now, there are Hussies around each corner. They may not even be aware of their Hussy destiny. But one thing is certain—when passion knocks on their door, lives will change for the better. And when it comes to their one special hero? Well, he's in for the ride of his life.

Which leaves one unanswered question...are *you* a Hussy?

## Chapter One

The quartet of Vespasian guards stepped off the shuttle with the synchronized steps of veterans but the hard, eager eyes of fresh recruits. At their belts, kinetic guns flashed like molten silver. Hiding more weapons and menace, long blood-red capes fretted in the dusty wind of Hadi's spaceport—a patch of compacted dirt, just like the rest of the planet. One of the guards spotted that for which they'd been dispatched, all the way from Vespas some two point four light-years away. A subtle nudge in his companion's rib. A nod for reply. Maybe they thought no one had noticed.

Dar Skara had.

As he unloaded the freighter and singlehandedly moved crates heavy enough to make four men sweat, he watched through his bangs the Vespasians' every move. Those sons of bitches. Contrary to them, he wasn't a bigoted, ethnocentric racist—he hated everybody with the same fire. It was just that he hated Vespasians *more*.

"You," called the last in file. His helmet bore the red eagle insignia of a commander. "Come here."

All of Dar's crewmates, sweaty and panting under the hammer-hard midday sun, stopped unloading the freighter to stand in an obedient if grumbling line by the old ship's tailgate. He hated them too. Sheep.

Dar didn't stop his work. That ship was rented and if it wasn't empty in half an hour, whatever was left in its cargo hold became part of the owner's manifest. Draconian measures. One of many in this God-forsaken system. Hadisians couldn't afford to lose a single water ration. Already summer was turning into fall and winter would come howling not far behind to turn the small planet into a veritable ice tomb. Underground habitats were a must on Hadi. Still, it was his home and he liked it the way it was. If only it could've been farther away from Vespas, their giant neighbor.

"I said," the man pulled his kinetic gun from his belt, the flash not lost in Dar's peripheral vision. "Come. *Here*."

"What?" Dar snapped, dropping the heavy crate, which landed in a cloud of dust and a muffled thud. "What the fuck do you want?"

Silence fell like a wet blanket.

To his credit, the commander looked nonplussed. "It should be obvious, Hadisian, even to a beast like you."

The old insult. To Vespasians, who revered themselves above everything else in their stupid belief systems—who the hell believed in sacrifices and the power of virgin blood—only animals populated Hadi and other neighboring planets. Even if they were all humans from the one source galaxies away. But Earth had abandoned all its colonies

after a while, lost or broke contact when it no longer suited its needs. And Vespas, the bully on the block with no one to stop it, had taken over.

Dar wanted to drive his fist into the commander's face. This was quickly becoming a stupid waste of his time. He had the ship to unload then lug everything onto the waiting heavy loader and clear the surface before nightfall. And this testosterone-stupefied asshole was getting in his way.

Dar wrapped his arms around the crate again and hoisted with a grunt. To his satisfaction, a couple of the guards stared with their mouths hanging open. Probably because they could see the weight stamped on the side. Four hundred pounds at one-atmosphere.

"I don't have time to compare dicks with you," he snarled, moving the crate to the pile then dropping it to wipe his sweaty hands on his coveralls. "Spit it out or get the fuck out of my way."

The Skara clan was renowned for their diplomacy. Nan—rest her soul—had always said there was never a good time to show bad manners. But then again, she'd worn a kinetic gun as long as her arm strapped to her back.

Instead of the nasty grin Dar expected to come over the guard's face—not that he gave a shit—a menacing triumph narrowed the man's eyes and stretched his mouth over perfectly aligned teeth. Dar had never trusted men with perfect teeth.

"You will be popular," he said, turning to his men and nodding.

Dar wanted to ask "For what?" but would rather have his balls chewed off by rats than give them the satisfaction.

As Dar knew they would, they broke ranks and fanned in a half circle in front of him. And as he knew they would, his crewmates backed safely away.

Typical Hadisians to go down on all fours and wait for Vespas to fuck them in the ass.

The commander pulled a length of silvery wire from a clip at his belt. "You will put them on, Hadisian, and follow us."

Dar grinned, knowing his rictus must have looked more predatory than anything else to these sissies. "You hope I'm gonna make it easy for you?"

With a grin, the commander lobbed the manacles in front of Dar's feet. "What I hope for will come in a week. Put them on."

Widening his stance—he stood well over six and a half feet—Dar put his fists on his hips. "That means you need me alive. Big mistake."

The grins slid off the guards' faces. One threw a worried look at the commander.

If Dar were a betting man, he'd put his silver on that one. Weakest link in the chain.

Instead of waiting—and waiting was for sissies and those who didn't have the balls to take what they wanted—Dar threw himself at the guards, using his wingspan to tackle four of them to the dusty ground.

Under the ferocity of his assault, he felt bones crunch and limbs give. Howls of pain testament to his method. He'd never been one to take anything lying down or waiting for the other to make the first move. Life was short. Either a guy took it by the horns and hung on or he moved out of the fucking way.

While he stood from the snarl of limbs, something struck him in the lower back. He barked a ferocious laugh. Nan could hit harder than that.

Dar snapped his elbow back, caught something softer than his bone, then kept going so he could wrap an arm around the guard's head, curl his biceps to reel him in. Dar squeezed hard and downward and felt something snap. His armpit was the last thing this guy would see. The incongruous thought made Dar grin. Motherfuckers wanted him alive, did they? He'd make them earn every last ounce.

A deluge of blows rained on him, fists, feet, butt ends of silvery guns. He snarled a curse when one of the remaining guards wrapped himself around Dar's legs, threw him off balance. Despite a fist on the commander's cape for support, Dar fell heavily, taking the three remaining guards with him. Dust ground into his cheek and forehead when he landed on his front, six hundred pounds plus of Vespasian meat and burnished golden armor crushing him.

A whole lot more hands and feet then entered the fray and Dar realized—with some disgust but no real shock—that some of his crewmates had joined the fight. Probably hoping to score points with the Vespasians.

"You motherfucking—"

Someone kicked him in the face, snapped his head back. Through his hair, he spotted blood in thin, long splatters in the dirt, knew some of it must have been his but not *all* of it. Either he gave it his all right now, or he could pull his pants down and let the Vespasians have their way with him. Not his style.

With a roar, Dar managed to push himself up on his hands and knees, arched to dislodge whoever had decided to take residence on his back, and while he filled one fist with someone's hair, he drove his other into whatever portion of body was close enough. Curses, howls of pain, snarls.

Before he could retract his hand, something hard and cold was slipped around his wrist. The manacles.

"Hold him! Quickly!"

Dar thrashed and pummeled, kicked and bit—might get some Vespasian disease but he no longer cared—and attacked everything that fucking moved. But in the end, the sheer weight of bodies pressing on all sides bore him down into the dirt. His face was crushed into it so hard that his nose bent then broke with a muffled crunch. He growled impotently while blood seeped into his mouth. He could barely breathe. His free arm was forced back. Something ripped his coveralls down to his waist. Cold between his shoulder blades. Cold and sharp.

Fuck.

Dar heard the dermagun go off, felt the tiny crystals lodging under his skin. Heat spread to his entire back. Air, glorious air, entered his lungs when the mountain of men moved from him and left him panting and dizzy, facedown in the dirt. Someone said something he didn't get. Sounds came to him dim and distant. Whatever they'd given him was potent stuff. He was rolled onto his back, tried to curl his torso up so he could at least sit.

The commander leaned over to put his foot in Dar's chest and pushed him back down. Haloed in bright sunlight that stabbed into the brain, the man's face loomed large. He panted hard but seemed satisfied. Blood glistened pink between his teeth when he grinned.

"Welcome to the games...*gladiator*."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sweaty bodies glistened under the hard, midafternoon sun while the deep azure and aqua of the sky matched the athletes' synthetic leather training uniforms. Long banners the color of blood flapped atop each of the titanium flagpoles. Except for those training and the ones guarding them, the coliseum was empty. In a week, fifty thousand spectators would squeeze into the mammoth stone and granite open-air amphitheater to watch the momentous show. Fifty thousand voices would rise, one hundred thousand hands would clap and feet stomp. In a week, one—or more—of these men and women presently training would die in the gladiator games. Opal closed her eyes briefly. Perhaps the guilt would not find her there. But it did. It always did.

Dust rose in a puff when Makala sent Holly to the ground with a sloppy attack the woman should have been able to parry.

By the time Opal reached the pair of gladiators, Holly was wiping sand off her muscled thighs and cursing. Blood glistened on her shoulder.

They stood lance-straight when Opal approached. "Gladiator," she said, "what do you think happened?"

Holly cast a venomous glance at Makala, who offered the boyish grin so popular with the female members of the audience. Sweat made black satin of his skin.

"He dipped his shoulder," Holly snarled. "Because he knew I would've kicked his ass."

Opal nodded. "But then he reversed his stance when you went charging in because he knew you could change neither speed nor direction once you were off."

She took a step aside, enjoined Makala to face her with his pila in a two-handed grip. The staff quivered when he imitated Opal and crouched slightly.

Makala attacked quick and hard, drove the blunt end of his staff toward her belly, perhaps hoping to catch her off guard or find a flaw in her skills. He did not miss his mark. In fact, his thrust was perfect. Against anyone else, he would have scored a good



hit. Against Opal Seleria, who had been raised, not merely trained, a gladiator from a long and illustrious bloodline, he never even came close.

She snapped her own pila down against his, sidestepped the attack then pivoted to use the forward momentum against her opponent, driving the blunt end behind his knee. With a flick of her forearm, she sent Makala flipping backward. He landed flat on his back. Opal finished with her pila resting lightly under his chin.

“Never rush at your attacker. Let them move first, use their energy against them.”

She did not offer her hand to help him up. There was a line she would not—could not—cross. As much as her gladiators respected her martial skills and thrived under her gentle style, they would stab her in the back at the first opportunity. Slaves would do anything to regain their freedom. She had learned this harsh lesson at a young age. Back when her mother had been trainer to the gladiators, she had befriended one of them, a secret familiarity—perhaps even more—that had lasted three years and cost her her marriage, only to be forced to watch him die. Then die herself. Opal’s father had left soon after for one of Vespas’ many off-world trading posts. They still communicated once or twice a year even if she had little to say to him.

If she shared her late mother’s legendary skills at training gladiators, Opal did not want to end like her, a broken and bitter woman. Already, she viewed her gift more like a curse with every game. So she made it her primary goal to train her stable to the best of her ability. If they succeeded in the yearly, bloody gladiatorial games, they could hopefully win their freedom back at the end of their three years. But then again, with Praetor Sanguis as owner, the odds of this happening were slim since the fighters were kept in stasis between training and fights. She had argued against such drastic method. She needed her gladiators awake to learn and train. But he feared a mutiny the likes of which had afflicted a few stable owners and had decided on stasis pods to keep them more manageable.

Still, some of Sanguis’ slaves *had* earned their freedom after their three years. She never heard back from the freed fighters and could not really blame them. Sometimes while she meditated or waited for sleep to claim her, Opal wondered what sort of life they built for themselves after fighting for Praetor Sanguis.

As if the mere thought of his name brought the devil forward, the man himself presently stepped out of the lower arcade, blood-red cape a sharp contrast to his snowy robes flowing around his powerful strides. How could a man so fit, handsome and healthy-looking harbor such a perfidious and vile soul?

*Duty to the empire*, she reminded herself. Her mother had believed in the code and so did she.

She stood with her pila lowered as a mark of respect. Behind her, she heard the rustle of uniforms and the faint thuds of knees coming in contact with the sand. The slaves had knelt. Sometimes she felt little more than one herself.

“Praetor Sanguis,” she said with a nod.

The muscled blond nodded in reply, licked his lips the way she detested as he gazed down at Holly's lowered head. With the sweat, her nape and shoulders glistened. A crimson line dribbled around the curve of her biceps. This was what had caught Sanguis' supposedly indolent eye. But she knew better.

"I have secured a new fighter for you to train, Seleria." He spoke to her, but his hungry gaze still rested on the injured redhead.

"We already have a full stable, Praetor. And one week will not—"

"A Hadisian," the man went on as though she had not spoken. "He will be the damnati, of course, but should prove exhilarating to watch before he dies."

She hated the new concept of damnati. Throwaway fighters. So she was not to train him too much, this Hadisian, since his role would only be to provide entertainment on the first day of the games. Such a waste. Of her time, of this man's potential. Although she doubted any Hadisian, all headstrong and crude, could be trained for anything at all. Sanguis had lobbied long and hard to change the damnati rules to what they were now. In her mother's days—and that of the former owner Sanguis senior—damnati would lose, yes, but not die. If one performed particularly well, he or she would be elevated to the rank of gladiator with all due honors. Nowadays, damnati were little more than fodder. Some senators were apparently negotiating hard to revert to the old ways. She would vote on the motion as soon as one of them found the courage to stand up to Sanguis and present it to the senate and Emperor Galba. Not an easy task since the praetor's enemies tended to die prematurely. And messily.

Opal nodded even if deep inside she did not agree with her praetor. One simply did not argue with Sanguis.

"With your permission," Opal said, putting herself between Holly and Sanguis. "We have much training still to do to make these fights the best Vespasians will have ever seen. Your stable will be the envy of every other."

He seemed to snap out of his trance, nodded slowly then raised his icy blue eyes to her. Opal forced her face to remain impassive when he approached, leaned into her to rest his chin against her shoulder. He smelled of spices and incense. "The taste of something offered," he whispered directly in her ear, "is nothing like that of something *taken*."

The sound of the several voices raised in shock and alarm delivered her from having to think of a reply to Sanguis' words. She had none that would please him or satisfy her.

"Be careful!" a man shouted. A chorus of grunts followed then curses.

From within the tunnel leading to the stasis chambers and other habitats emerged a team of guards with a hoverlift floating in their midst. Silvery mesh covered a form that thrashed and nearly overbalanced the platform hovering a few inches off the sand.

"Ah, finally," Sanguis said, rubbing his hands and smiling.

He rushed to help with the unloading of what Opal knew to be the damnati. Curses that would have made her mother's hair stand on end erupted from within the netting.

One of the guards triggered the mesh and the telltale blue arc of electricity coursed over the silvery wires. After a second of silence, the man under the net began to curse with renewed fire. Another jolt. This one silenced him for longer.

With Sanguis ordering them as would a general going to war—Sanguis was very much “hands-on” in every sense of the word—the hoverlift stabilized a short distance from Opal then in a cloud of sand landed on the ground.

She noticed some of the slaves, Thomasz and Adrian, two former criminals who provided much of the bloodiest fights, smiled with bitter satisfaction. No honor amongst slaves. How could they smile when it could very well be them under the mesh? No honor at all.

The guard, wiping blood off his brow, triggered the mesh again. Kept his thumb on the control for at least four or five seconds.

“I cannot work with an injured fighter,” Opal loudly reminded the guards. And the praetor.

Commander Illo, the oldest serving guard in Sanguis’ house, stepped forward and took the control from his man. He flipped his cape half off his shoulder. She returned the salute with a small nod. He too had served under Sanguis senior’s rule. Opal wondered if he missed the days of old as well.

“This Hadisian killed three of my men,” Illo said, his eyes betraying his awe despite the hard line of his mouth. “With his *bare hands*. We had to pile on top of him just to slip the restraints on.” He turned back, shook his head. “He woke in the shuttle. Despite the medications.”

Impressive. All the more unfortunate for him.

Opal sighed. “Let me handle this.”

The guards backed by several paces when she approached the mesh, lifted a corner with the end of her pila and leaned over so she could see.

Long black hair was all she could see at first. Then eyes like those of a rabid animal.

Opal barely had time to skip back. To her shock, the whole thing went flying back—at least two hundred pounds of steel rings held together with conductive wire—and this huge, bearded man in ripped and faded black coveralls snapped to his feet with amazing agility and speed for his build. With a fist the size of a ham, he grabbed her pila and yanked her forward.

For a split second she stood transfixed by this man’s obsidian eyes. She could see nothing else. The moment lasted the lifespan of a flash.

With a pivot and a flick of her forearm, Opal disengaged her pila from the man’s grip. Every instinct told her to finish him off right then and there. He was trouble. Towering, longhaired, bearded, two-hundred-and-fifty-pounds-plus of trouble. Instead, she aborted the muscular response and cautiously stepped back. She only noticed then the medical team had already branded him with Sanguis’ mark, thick black lines around the slave’s left eye and temple. Bruised skin was still swollen in places.

He tossed his long black hair back and growled at her. Literally *growled*. He made other Hadisians she had seen look like dainty Vespasian ladies.

Caked blood matted his mustache and one side of his head, and he seemed to favor a leg. What had they done to him?

“You should keep your energy for when it matters, damnati,” she said, knowing her low and gentle voice – usually – had the effect of calming even the most recalcitrant fighter.

Not this one.

A mean smile split the black beard and crinkled the dark eyes. “It matters *now*,” a deep rumbling voice replied.

He charged.

Opal barely had time to sidestep the savage rush. With the length of arms he had, she wisely leaped well back and let him go on his merry way. Panting and snarling curses, he whirled around, raked a bear paw of a hand in his hair. Then he charged *again*!

This time Opal snapped him a quick little jab behind the thigh as he went by, hoping to convince him of the futility of his tactic. But the large man must have been born without pain sensors for he snapped a hand back, quick and precise, and ripped the pila from her grip. That had not happened since her training days. Knowing the rest watched in rapt attention – Sanguis kept licking his lips, she doubted he noticed – Opal backpedaled furiously.

His black gaze on her, he two-handed the pila, one block-like fist on each end, brought it up high then snapped his arms down. The pila, made from tungsten alloy with graphite coating and able to withstand excessive force and violence, snapped in half as if it were a twig. He tossed both bits behind him, made the closest guards leap out of the way.

Before Opal could recuperate from her shock, he charged. *Again*.

This time, he came at her as a wrestler would, shoulder down and arms wide. He meant to tackle her. If she let this mountain of muscle get his weight on her, she would never come back up again.

Fortunately, even if the man *was* strong and fit, he clearly had benefitted from no formal training at all. A debutant would have pointed out at least half a dozen flaws in his style. Smart man used his size to his advantage, commendable, but neglected everything else. Such as his weak points.

Opal waited until the very last moment. She leaped as high as she could, legs tucked under her, and planted a palm on his back as he rushed by, letting the momentum spin her around then landing astride his powerful back, arms wrapping around his head. As one would mount a rushing horse.

As soon as she touched the giant of a man, something happened.

In a rush of adrenaline, her surroundings sharpened, cleared. She felt more alive than ever before. The forced physical contact with the damnati triggered a sharp jab of sexual awareness, a keen twinge of carnal hunger between her thighs. Muscles rippled under his bronzed skin. Black hair like ribbons hung in a point between his shoulder blades. A truly magnificent specimen of maleness. Like riding a lover. A powerfully built and virile one. As rare as an endangered breed, just as feral. And deadly.

The fragile bubble burst when he twisted to overbalance her. Before he could yank her off—and his plate-size hand was coming at her for just that goal—she reluctantly struck him at the base of the skull. Such a dishonorable strike against one so noble of form.

A shudder passed through him. For a reason she could not explain to herself, she hated doing this to him. She had taught harsher lessons to others. Why this élan of guilt? Perhaps the raw physical maleness clouded her judgment.

Like a great beast going to sleep, he crumbled to his knees, Opal guiding the fall as best she could so he would not hurt himself any more than he already had. In a great *humph* of air, he collapsed on his front and lay very still. Still conscious but momentarily paralyzed. Sand erupted in small puffs as he panted.

Opal bent over close to his head and with her hand shielded his eyes from the sand. “I truly am sorry, damnati,” she murmured for his benefit only. No one needed to hear this. “But this is the way of things now, you are a slave. This is your new life. Adapt and fight or you will die.” Prematurely.

When the guards came to retrieve him and hoist him up—he looked only slightly diminished but still alert, anyone else would be out cold—he spat at her feet then let them drag him back onto the hoverlift.

Praetor Sanguis crouched by the damnati’s side, cupped his large hand under the man’s bearded chin and lifted his head. “What is your name?”

The damnati pulled his face from the hand. “Fuck. You.”

“He is called Dar Skara,” interjected the commander. He pulled an ID from his pocket but Sanguis did not even look at it.

The praetor grinned. “Dar Skara.” He looked up at the sky, murmured the name a few times. He turned to Opal. “The people will love him.”

“They will,” she replied, not looking at her praetor but at Dar Skara, who perhaps had been born with neither pain sensors nor preservation instincts. Could he not see the menace in Sanguis’ eyes? Perhaps he did not care. Reckless man.

Frustration bubbled just beneath the surface. She could tell just by the way he stared stubbornly into her face, even if his fate could have benefited from paying closer attention to the guards’ position, or his future stable mates’ stances and choice of weapons. No, instead he chose to make this a personal battle of wills with her.

“I doubt you will be able to train him with the rest,” Sanguis remarked, standing. “I fear he would not play well with the others.”

A few of the guards chuckled. Commander Illo removed his helmet, wiped the sweat off his brow then covered his head once more. "With your leave, Praetor."

Sanguis licked his lips as he backed toward the door, his eyes never leaving the damnati. "You have done well, Commander. Come rejoice with me." He glanced at the still-kneeling Holly, smiled.

Opal took a step forward. Pure instincts. "We only have a week, Praetor."

Sanguis shrugged, turned around and seemed to forget everything else as the commander joined him on his way out.

Except for the guards whose duty was to protect the training field—they stood in the shade of the giant retractable awning—the rest left. With the red eagle spread well over a hundred feet on the flapping canvas, the guards resembled hatchlings of some monstrous bird. Under the empire's wings. The symbolism was not lost on her.

"Keep training in pairs," she announced to the group of slaves who still knelt in the sand, even if most had straightened to look at the fuming Hadisian. "Pila and short swords. Sets of ten attacks and parries."

Opal retrieved the broken halves of what had been her mother's practice pila then crouched not far from the glowering man.

Holly stood uncertainly a few paces back. By the corner of her eye, Opal saw the debate going on inside the proud redhead. The shifting from foot to foot, hands clenching and unclenching.

"Thanks," Holly snarled before turning away and joining Makala. He would bear the brunt of the woman's ire. As usual.

Opal returned the woman's thanks with a small nod. She would never let Sanguis use one of her gladiators as a personal plaything. Even if she had to place herself in disfavor, which she had already achieved several times since his appointment a few years before. Sadly, Sanguis the son shared none of the proud character of Sanguis the father.

"Obviously," she said, turning to the damnati, "I cannot understand your position. But I can help you fight well and die proud."

He just kept staring. Black eyes—a purplish mark was spreading over the bridge of his nose—narrowed mouth unseen in the black beard that covered half his face and joined his long hair. Both of which would prove a nuisance at best and a danger to him at worst. The tattoo on his proud brow glistened with new ink. Sanguis' artist had done a superb job. Each line like black flames was defined against the skin of his temple and around his eye. Contrary to the others, it suited him very well, lent him a menacing, old-world warrior air. She could have stared at that face long past the bounds of propriety. In fact, turning away was proving hard indeed.

"My name is Opal Seleria," she said to him. With a hand she brushed his bangs away from his face. A terrible rage flashed in the obsidian orbs. The tattoo crinkled when he scowled. If he could, he would kill her with his bare hands. "I will be your trainer."

"Touch...me again," he growled with difficulty for the temporary paralysis still affecting his body from the neck down. "And I...rip your throat...out."

A twinge of regret made Opal want to seek the sanctuary of her chambers and meditate a while. She needed it right now with the impact this man had on her. "Keep your energy for the games, damnati."

"I don't play...games."

"You will have to."

"Fuck off."

"Very well." She stood, dusted her uniform. "Feeling to your limbs should return in a minute or so."

## Chapter Two

Maybe she didn't get his message loud enough and clear enough. As much as he put all his hatred into his stare, the tall blonde – not blonde actually, her hair was pretty much white – just stood there. Talking.

Opal Seleria.

He hated himself for it, but he thought she had to be the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen. Back on Hadi, she would've had her choice of men in a heartbeat. Muscular, the way he liked his women – who the fuck wanted to wrap his hand around a stick – and tall with white hair and the strangest violet eyes, she'd wielded that javelin-thing with practice and strength. Obviously this was a woman both strong and smart. A fighter. This, he could respect. What he couldn't accept was how this whole outfit worked.

Vespas thought nothing of plucking people from smaller planets and colonies and bringing them here to fight in their games. Who the fuck did that anyway? Neo-Roman bullshit. How could fifty million people go crazy all at once? Must've been something in the water. He'd like to do something to their water supply too, assholes, down a few beers and have some fun with their reservoirs.

Vespas did whatever the fuck they wanted. Who would stop them? Earth? Ha! Vespas did what it wanted because it had placed men on every world and colony in the system. It was called power projection – replacing foreign rulers with one's own puppets. Hadi had had such "rulers". And now it had its Vespasian puppet. But if they thought for one second he was going to play nice with them they had another think coming.

"Just shut up, would you?" he snapped after she'd entered into some explanation of how things worked and whatnot. "I don't give a shit. I'm not staying."

Some of the fighters turned to stare. He glowered at them through his bangs and they turned away. Fucking sheep. Just like everybody else.

She smiled, nodded. Dimpled smile? He loved those. Too bad she was a fucking Vespasian whore working for a fucking Vespasian asshole on the fucking Vespasian homeworld. All of which he hated.

And he owed her one for making an ass of him. Whatever she'd done to him – one punch, for God's sake, *one* punch – had laid him out cold for a good half minute. He'd lost sound, vision and blacked out for a few seconds. Oh yes, he owed her one for that.

As she'd said it would, feeling returned to his limbs. A body-wide tingle made him grit his teeth as he rolled onto his side then climbed up to one knee. Surprisingly, there



was no pain at all except for a small discomfort at the base of his skull. She knew what she was doing.

"Well, damnati, do you want to rest before we start?"

Didn't she get the message?

"What the fuck is a damnati anyway?" he spat.

Her gaze never wavered when she replied. "They are the fighters who will lose."

What, no remorse, no guilt or any of those sissy emotions that plagued the human race nowadays? She should've been Hadisian. "That doesn't seem to make a stitch of difference to you, does it?"

He straightened to his full height. His face throbbed from the tattoo. Made him cranky. He had no idea what it looked like, only that he'd woken while the artist was putting on the finishing touches. Artist he'd sent back on her ass with a good swipe that narrowly missed her head. Lucky bitch. Guards had piled on—again—and put that silver mesh thing on him. With the jolt it gave, he'd remained quiet. Mostly.

"Damnati, ha, some fancy name. Sending guys out to be butchered. Makes for a great show, huh?"

"Not butchered. I will train you well so you can fight well."

"Fuck off, lady. I don't need no fancy training. Been fighting all my life." And bore the scars to prove it too. And the broken tooth.

She looked at the broken stick in her hands—strong, wide hands with calluses—but didn't throw away the pieces. Why the hell not? What good was a broken stick? Sentimental value?

Her eyes crinkled when she smiled. "You would not last five minutes against a trained gladiator. My training will bring you a proud death."

If his blood pressure ratcheted up any higher the top of his skull would blow and spray his brains out at least five feet high. Dar couldn't believe he was hearing all this shit. What did they feed these cretins?

"Listen, Opal, and listen well." He shrugged off the top of his coveralls, noted the flare of her eyes and tightening of her lips—and if her reaction didn't make him want to pump his chest. He tied the sleeves around his waist. "I'll do what I have to because I'm a fighter and a survivor. But if you think for one goddamn second that I'm putting myself out there to amuse some prissy cock-sucker, I suggest you gun me down right now. Because I don't intend to lose. Got that? And I don't intend to stay either."

"It is the way of things. You are damnati, and damnati lose."

But her eyes sparkled in a way he hadn't seen them do before. Might be something he could work on. "Yeah, yeah, the way of things. Keep telling yourself that when I hand you your ass on a platter."

He took a step closer and wanted to smile when she angled one foot a bit wider. A fighter's stance. Her smell reached him, sweat and something sweet like fruit. But she didn't back away even if he towered over her—what? six-foot frame—by a good head

and surpassed her muscular build by at least sixty pounds. Gutsy thing. When he leaned over, hands at his sides so she wouldn't interpret his body language in an overly threatening manner—he was already well inside her bubble—his bangs spilled over his eyes. Large orbs a mix of pale blue and purple flared as she watched him. She'd put something on her lips, some type of glossy balm. He wondered if it tasted the same as it smelled. Like fruit. He also wondered if her pussy would taste like fruit as well. Not that it mattered one fucking bit.

"I've got a name and it's Dar, not damnati," he snarled. Somewhere behind him, he heard a gun being charged. Some guard thought he was close enough. Smart man.

"You stopped being 'Dar' when you entered this coliseum." Her voice was subdued, her lips barely moved. Yet her eyes spoke plenty.

"You realize I could break your neck before anyone could do shit about it?"

She pressed her lips to moisten them. Gave him quite the must-fuck-now twitch in the balls. "You would be dead before you hit the ground."

He offered her his most predatory smile. "You'd kill me with your broken stick there?"

Her expression hardened. Ahh, sensitive spot, right? Good to know.

With her chin, she indicated the guards paying close attention to the exchange. "No, but they would."

"Not in time."

"You are right, perhaps not." With that, she turned around—*turned her back* to him—and walked to a rack of practice weapons by the wall. With a grin that both taunted and turned him on like nothing else, she leveled a wooden sword at him. "And now I know you would not attack someone in the back. You better change that attitude, damnati, because as admirable as it is, it will get you killed. Prematurely."

If he'd been hooked to a monitor right now, he sure as shit would've broken records for blood pressure. The little... That fucking little...

He hated Vespasians.

Opal had never seen such rage darken a man's expression before. Veins bulged along his temples and on his bull's neck. For a second, she feared he would collapse from the sheer strain on his heart. But he took a step forward, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Hatred flashed in his eyes like twin black suns. Oh, he hated her right now, with a passion.

Yet she had spoken the truth, if he did not harvest that rage and learn some tactics instead of charging like a mad beast, he would die prematurely. She did not want that. Not that she wanted to prolong his suffering, far from it. He deserved to fight well and die proud. She wanted all her fighters to do well so they could either die a good gladiator death or go on to earn their freedom after their three years. They may have been slaves, but they were still human beings. She bore no ill will toward them, quite

the contrary. But for this giant specimen of male, this hirsute mountain of muscle and little self-control, she felt a whole lot more than professional pride. Her senses responded to him in ways that had never happened before. He filled her eyes and nose with his bronzed skin and manly scent, her ears with his deep and rough voice, and sent her skin tingling with need. Such large hands...

Opal shook her head. It was only his body, tall, thick and strong, that attracted her. Or perhaps his simple and direct attitude—it surely was not his charming personality.

"Let us see what you can do, damnati."

Why did she taunt him? Like poking a sleeping dragon in the eye. She could not stop herself, had to trigger that feral rage brewing just beneath the surface, had to stoke his fire for the sheer thrill of seeing his body tighten, muscles bulging along his shoulders and chest. It made him unbelievably attractive, despite the long hair, thick black beard and hard eyes. Or perhaps because of it.

He growled curses as he stalked to the weapons rack, yanked a wooden sword out and broke it in a single strike against the edge of the support. "Call that a weapon?"

He took another, swung it once in an ugly but potent arc then broke that one too. Slivers of wood flew and hit the wall ten feet away. Cocky. But strong. The weapons had survived years of training, dozens of gladiators, some of them the best on Vespas. And this man had just grabbed a pair, smacked them against the support without apparent effort and broke them in two. Not mentioning her pila.

Opal sighed. "Damnati, if you do not trust the weapons at your disposal, just face me with your fists. Which will teach you nothing of benefit for the games. Every fight is fought with either pila or sword."

"Where I come from, they're called sticks. Gimme a gun and I'll show you some gladiator shit."

Even if all of the others trained hard and looked busy, she knew they monitored the exchange. Especially Thomasz and Adrian. This man could mean trouble, not by his leadership qualities but from the sheer stubbornness. Others might be tempted to emulate him. But what could she do? She was loath to bring this to the praetor's attention. He already meddled with her fighters too much as it was. More than meddled.

"Who do I fight anyway?"

"Other gladiators."

"Yeah, I got that part, lady," he snarled, picked a third sword then waved it around as one would a fly swatter. He joined her. "Where're they from?"

"They are mostly Vespasian slaves, criminals, maybe a handful from other worlds. There was one Yithian but he died in the last games. A shame."

"Mostly Vespasians, huh?"

The smile on him would have sent children running.

"You would enjoy nothing more than killing us all."

"Damn right. I'd like to do to you what you've been doing to us for centuries. Turn the tables and make you taste your own sauce, if you know what I mean. Switch places. But you'd never catch me in a dress."

"They are called togas."

"Men in dresses and perfect teeth," he sneered. His bangs obscured his eyes when he lowered his chin. "Just too fucking precious."

"Are you wasting time because you are afraid I will beat you too quickly?"

There was nothing like a good gust to fan an inferno.

The damnati charged like a bull.

Dust rose in clouds behind him as he rushed at her, sword in a block-like fist, hair flying back, heavy muscles bulging under his sweaty skin. Should she miss her parry or block with anything less than all her strength, he would, without a doubt, either break both her arms or drop his sword and snap her neck.

But she was ready. In more ways than one. The sheer animal strength and magnetism emanating from the damnati fired all her senses. She not only wanted to fight him, she also hungered for a mere touch. Even if it had lasted a few seconds, her thighs still cramped at the memory of his vigorous body between them.

At the last possible second, she whirled out of the way and slapped the flat of her sword against his lower back. His growl of outrage stirred her blood.

But he spun around fast, arm at full extension—the man had some reach—and the tip of his blunt sword struck her on the shoulder. The hit rang all along her arm and chest. She nearly dropped her weapon. Pain radiated outward from the hit.

He kicked sand at her, perhaps hoping she would fall for such an easy trick. Opal deftly spun once, sword leading, spun a second time then caught him on the wrist before he had time to follow. But he came close.

"Baths!" she yelled. "Everyone but the damnati!"

A dark smile split his bearded face. "What?" he taunted. "Don't want your posse to see you hit the dirt?"

"I am trying to preserve *your* honor, not mine," she countered. A bit more huffily than she would have preferred.

By the corner of her eye, she saw the other gladiators trooping out of the arena after the portcullises had risen within the arches. Holly cast one last look at the pair before she followed Makala and the rest inside. Opal would need a long bath herself afterward, if only to cool her blood. She would also need a trip to the healer for her arm, which lanced to the rhythm of her heart. If the damnati lacked even the most basic skills, his strength and pure ferocity more than compensated for his flaws. He would be magnificent in the games. Sadly, as damnati, he would not survive the first day.

"You should've kept your goons around." He switched his sword to his left hand.

Ambidextrous? A rare gift.

She switched hands as well. "I do not need them."

The damnati nodded. That hair was calling to her. What would it feel like to share her bed with such a man, to anchor his face to her sex by fistfuls of his glorious black hair?

"Yeah, right, got your snipers to bail your ass out."

"I do not need them either."

He began to circle her slowly, arms out wide, eyes narrowed. Dust clung to the bottom of his coveralls and black boots. These were the biggest feet she had ever seen.

"Send them away then," he snarled. "If you're so damn good."

She grinned. "You must think I am stupid."

"You don't want to know what I think of you."

She could not explain why, but his barb hurt. Why did he hate everyone and everything? Because even if she could understand his reaction to the recent events, the rage she saw in his dark eyes was not new. An old, old hatred, ingrained in his personality. Old pain perhaps?

Opal yelped when he came at her so hard and so fast she never had time to parry or block. When the two-hundred-and-fifty-plus pounds of muscle hit—and she had become adept at judging fighters' weight—she went down heavily. Air left her in a great huff when she landed on her back with the damnati sprawled over her. A hand like a vise grip closed over her wrist. The sword rolled out of her weakening grasp.

A small burst of sand erupted not far from her head. A warning shot from the guards.

His sweaty skin connected against hers around her practice uniform. His thick thigh pressed between her bare legs, sent shivers up her spine.

"You're lucky," he snarled in a low voice.

His breath, hot against her face, smelled of cinnamon and a hint of the medications with which the guards must have subdued him. Using his greater weight to keep her pinned, he planted her hand high over her head. Sand ground in her knuckles. She welcomed it, the abrasion, the pressure, the weight of him. For a second, she imagined what else he could do with those big hands.

"Luck," she panted, "is for the unskilled."

Another tiny eruption, this one very close to the damnati's shoulder, tossed sand against his arm. He did not even seem to notice the guards were firing at him.

"You can make me fight in your stupid games, you can keep me here for a while, but I'll have the last laugh, *Vespasian*. I'll shoot my way out if I have to." His eyes blazed.

Her heart skipped a beat. "There is only one way out for the damnati." Sadly.

Opal shifted her pelvis so she could break out of his grip. The movement triggered something in him—as well as in herself—because his eyes flared then narrowed to slits. The tattoo moved with his expression. A hint of lips glistened amidst the black beard. He was smiling. Not kindly either.

"So you *are* a Vespasian whore like the rest," he snarled in undertones.

His cruel words had the effect of a cold shower and, if only to teach him a valuable lesson—never mind her wounded pride—Opal moved fast. She snapped her elbow down too quickly for him to avoid. He caught it on the mouth.

While he turned his head away and cursed, Opal arched her pelvis off the ground, which plastered her hips against his and produced a fine peak of sexual energy. She kicked out and wide then rolled away before the much larger man could do more damage.

Standing, Opal backed to a safer distance. She let go of the rage, the ache in her heart his words caused. He hated her. Understandable reaction. Peace returned, if a little tinged by regret.

"That was..." she panted, swallowed hard. "That was very good, Dar." He had earned the right to be called by his name for this one time. It was the least she could do, even if his mocking her physical reaction to him wounded her female pride. So much potential. Such a waste to have been chosen as *damnati*. Perhaps she could ask the praetor to reconsider.

He spat blood as he slowly climbed to his feet. "Good? Next time I touch you...you won't think it's just 'good'. Sneaky little shit."

A shiver tingled up her spine.

"Should I inform the praetor, Miss Seleria?" one of the guards called from his perch atop the perimeter wall. He had his eye to his sight, ready to deliver the lethal shot. Only she had the authority to give such an order. She had never used it. The praetor never had either, preferring other methods of punishment.

"No!"

Opal cleared her throat, massaged her aching shoulder. "No," she repeated in a calmer voice. The thought of Sanguis punishing the *damnati* did not set well with her. Not for a fight she had instigated. "Resume your post."

While the guards returned to their spots under the large awning and away from the pitiless sun, the *damnati*—Dar, she corrected herself—raked his hair back from his face. Blood smeared his hands.

"This is enough for today," Opal announced, gathering the pieces of her broken pila and slipping them under her arm. "We both earned a hot bath and some food."

"I don't do 'hot baths'. You can marinate in your grime all you want but me, I'm having a shower."

She chose to ignore the provocation. "After your *bath*, the guards will escort you to the galley then to the stasis chambers."

"Keep your fighters on ice so they don't get ideas?"

After the portcullises were raised once again, she set for the tunnel leading to the underground maze of chambers, living habitats—one of them her own. She felt him behind her, felt his stare drilling between her shoulder blades. Despite the presence of

guards escorting them and the sentries posted at the baths' doors, she could not help feeling that a very large and angry predator stalked her. Neither could she help the sensualization he triggered. Need jabbed her low in the belly. This man would know how to handle her needs.

She set her broken pila halves by the wall, caught him looking at her butt as she leaned over. Another image juxtaposed itself over reality. Of him standing behind her, taking her. Opal gritted her teeth for inner strength.

Steam billowed from the baths when she pushed against the doors. White marble imported all the way from Earth gleamed with water. Except for the state-of-the-art water system cleverly hidden, the décor had been designed with the old world in mind. Sanguis had spared no expense. On the walls, genuine ceramic tiles depicting gladiatorial scenes in shades of blue, mosaic floors the color of ashes, copper faucets and spigots, enormous baths large enough to fit all of Sanguis' vast retinue of friends, water scented with flowers and essences from faraway worlds.

The rest of the gladiators had already departed for the galley. She turned to Dar and caught the look of awe and admiration before he glowered at her.

"Take as long as you like," she said, stepping aside to let him pass. "The guards will be standing outside while I get the healer."

"I don't need no fucking healer."

He untied the sleeves from around his waist and kicked his boots off. They left dirty scuffs against the marble. He yanked his coveralls down to his ankles, underwear as well, then flicked them back with a foot.

She tried not to stare. She had seen plenty of naked bodies before, had been raised around them. But Dar's unique mix of sharp lines, natural muscles—not gym-produced, but from good genes and hard labor—and feral intensity created dramatic beauty she had rarely seen before. Most Vespasians viewed their neighbors from Hadi to be little more than beasts without enlightened culture or refinement, vestiges from Earth's squalid past when humans still lived in caves. She personally thought the Hadisians had only adapted to their harsh environment, as other humans had, as Vespasians had done themselves. Not animals, even if they were rather rustic in their ways. But Dar Skara transcended such definitions.

He walked by her without a look back, at ease with his nakedness—or too proud to show inhibitions. His black hair came down in a V in the middle of his wide back. Opal's thighs cramped just watching the man's back. She swallowed hard as she admired his forceful stride to the bath, down the tiled steps into the water. Steam rose in thin ribbons around him, coiled in the air above his head and stuck to his skin in a glistening coat that gave the man the sheen of a bronze statue.

Dar's head disappeared under the surface for a few seconds then reappeared when he straightened. Water came up to his waist. He turned around, threw her a slanted look then sat on one of the underwater ledges along the bath's rim.

"Well, you Vespasians do one thing right."

He sighed in contentment as he leaned back and hooked his long arms along the bath's ceramic edge. He closed his eyes, angled his head back to expose his strong neck and what portion of throat she could see below the beard. With the water, the tattoo resembled black satin strips. A sudden impulse to lick each droplet of water off him descended on her. Opal's palms tingled with the urge to touch him, rub scented oils on his skin, comb all that hair back from his face to get a better look. She realized she breathed hard as she stood in the doorway still.

"Are you sure you do not require a healer?" Her voice sounded tight even in her ears. That man had a profound effect on her. All she wanted to do was admire his perfect symmetry and animal grace.

He grinned, showing a broken tooth at the corner of his smile. "A backrub and a blowjob would be nice though, if you're offering."

Dar congratulated himself for his choice of words. Under normal circumstances, he'd never say something so unbelievably crude to a woman. Nan—rest her soul—would've smacked him upside the head in no time. But "Opal" was a Vespasian.

The look on her face. Shock then a gradual transition to anger. She blushed deep red and he knew it had nothing to do with demureness and everything to do with her hating his guts. Good. He was all for open communication. Plus, blushing suited her very, very well. That tingle in his balls was another reason he should—and did—hate her. She had no right making him all hot and horny. Messed everything up, dammit.

"You are so brave, are you not, Dar Skara? You fear nothing and no one."

"The only thing I fear is pissing God off."

"You believe in a god?"

"Don't you Vespasians all do? With your stupid rituals and nonsense? Or is it all just for the fuck of it?"

She crossed her arms and stared. That sleeveless tunic was murder on his self-control. The color of a cloudless sky, it hugged her strong frame in all the right places and ended just above the kneecaps. Her black boots had been polished to a high glimmer. He couldn't see them well, despite the slits up to her hips, but he knew she had killer thighs, nice and thick the way he liked them, with muscles and maybe even a couple of scars from her fights. Nothing beat a good scar on a tough woman. Gave them character. Who the fuck wanted some perfect little plastic doll to keep them warm? The hint of cleavage he could see wasn't bad either. But the throbbing in his busted bottom lip reminded him she was the bad guy. His beautiful enemy. He lost his hard-on in a hurry.

"So," he started, eyes closed so he could focus on something other than her gorgeous body and mesmerizing violet eyes. "When's the fight?"

"Next week," came her reply. She sounded pissed still. Good. Kept her on her toes. Less dangerous that way. "They last two days."



"Whoever survives day one gets to fight on day two."

"Yes."

Dar wondered how many ways she could modulate that word. Was she a screamer in bed? He'd love to hear it.

"Are you a screamer?"

"Pardon me?"

"In bed, are you a screamer?"

"No. Are you?"

"Men don't scream. We grunt."

A soft sound made him open his eyes to stare. Opal was shaking her head and chuckling. That had to be the cutest sound he'd ever heard. And she snorted!

To his shock, she unbuckled the wide belt, dropped it to the floor, unclasped the tunic, tossed that too before getting rid of the boots and a tiny pair of white panties and a see-through cami that did nothing for his self-control. Not a stitch of embarrassment he could detect either. What sort of woman stripped without blinking in front of a stranger? Not that he complained.

"What? Hadisian women do not take baths with the men?"

He grunted a reply as she stepped into a shallow pool by the side of the large steaming bath. Clearly, it was cold because she hissed. And because her nipples tightened to hard-looking rosy points. Shit.

"What're you doing? That part of your training, stripping for a guy's benefit?"

Opal rinsed her upper body. Man, the muscles on her! "What makes you think this is for your benefit?"

"Whose is it then if not me? See anyone else around? Is there a hole somewhere that some perv gets to look into?"

She shook her head. "No spectator. Just you and me fulfilling a common, basic need. Bathing."

Yeah, well, he had other common, basic needs she could fulfill too.

Opal wanted to laugh at his expression. Hadisians. So uptight yet so rustic. "I do not understand you people from Hadi. With your living conditions, one would think nakedness would not shock you."

"It's not shocking me," he retorted. "What, you think we're monkeys living in caves, butt-naked? Our 'living conditions', as you call them, are the exact reason us Hadisians like our space. When you're forced to live close together or die, you don't want people running around in their birthday suits."

He had not linked so many words since his arrival. She nodded in assent. "A valid point."

A grimace tightened his face and wrinkled the tattoo. "That was easy."

"What was?" She spent a few seconds just enjoying the sight of his muscular shoulders bulging when he rubbed his arms down then raked his long black hair back.

"Never mind." He threw her a slanted glance. "You're different than they are."

"In what sense?" She stood from the cold bath, feeling invigorated. And not a little aroused.

"You're a fighter."

"I am."

Opal could not help the pride she felt that he would think of her as a fighter, even if obviously she was. Her heart skipped a beat when he let his gaze roam down her body the way a hungry predator would. She had grown accustomed to appreciative looks from men and so-inclined women, but admiration had nothing to do with the way this Hadisian presently devoured her with his gaze.

"I bet you two months' rations that there isn't a single man on Vespas who can handle all of that." He motioned to her from head to toe with a gesture that made Opal swallow hard. "Sissies."

"But you could?"

A dark grin split the beard.

She walked out of the cold bath and stood by the edge of the steaming pool, breathing in the exotic scents of oils and precious soaps lined on a nearby bench. Her eyes never leaving his face, she backed to the assortment of oils, chose a bottle without looking, uncapped it so she could cup a bit of the golden oil in a hand that uncharacteristically shook. He watched her as would a hunter. Eyes not missing a detail, she was sure.

"We have more in common than genetics and a shared ancestral homeworld, our two peoples."

He bristled. "We're nothing like you. You wouldn't last a month on Hadi." He shrugged. "Maybe you could, but the rest of them...not a fucking chance."

Them? So he differentiated other Vespasians from her, viewed her differently? The allure of it thrilled her more than it should. While she contemplated his proud and pointed hairline, she rubbed oil on her arms, her belly and hips.

The damnati's dark eyes narrowed, his nostrils flared. Carnal hunger had a face. His.

As if the air had suddenly charged with electricity, a message passed from his eyes to his entire expression and stance, traversed distance and differences, and reached her loud and clear. Time seemed to stop. Nothing but senses mattered. The intellect took a backseat to physical awareness.

They shared a need. Pressing, imperative, ancient.

Knowing words would spoil it—whatever *it* was—Opal padded around the pool to stop a few paces from the Hadisian. Water had transformed his hair into bands of

obsidian, pearled on his skin like diamonds, glistened on the prominently boned face and the incisive bridge of his broken nose. The tattoo gleamed like living black flames.

Keeping his hands well in view, she sat by the pool, let her legs dangle into the hot water. Frissons tingled up her thighs. So hard had they grown, her nipples hurt.

Slowly, he extended an arm her way, wrist loose. She watched him, practiced eye on the shoulder since this was where she would spot the first sign of trouble. None seemed forthcoming. He let his hand rest against the ledge an inch or so from her thigh. Despite the lack of physical contact, she shivered as though he had touched her.

Instincts on full alert, Opal shifted her right leg so her knee would be closer to his hand. He met her halfway.

Contact.

With the tip of his fingers, he grazed her knee, deposited a pearl of water that slowly slid down her kneecap and joined with the pool water. Smells from the oil floated up when a flare of heat washed through her.

No words. Only senses. And instincts. Watching, gauging, on the hunt.

The Hadisian shifted in the pool, turned to her. She knew what he wanted from her. She also knew what she wanted from him.

Opal raised a foot out of the water and put it on the ledge by his face to share with him what they both wanted. Her sex, exposed to ambient air, bloomed and parted. He took a long look at it. Licked his lips.

Want. Need. Silent message.

It was with a silent exhalation that Opal shifted her other leg as he grew nearer, wide shoulders barely out of the water. He must have been kneeling. Her gaze on his, she retrieved the bottle, tilted it between her breasts, let a few drops of scented oil roll down her belly. Each droplet tingled as it slid down, around her navel, seeped into her pubic hair. Frissons accompanied the oil's teasing course. He watched each attentively.

When he tilted his chin downward, Opal knew. She put the bottle back, planted her hands behind herself, spread her thighs. And waited.

So gradually he might as well have remained immobile, the Hadisian grew near, nearer still, water rippling in tiny undulations that originated around his shoulders and chest and ended along her calf in a progressively shorter journey. Electrifying.

The heat of his breath grazed her inner thigh. Burned her when his skin connected. The memory of having "ridden" him earlier made her fight for breath. That strong, wide back.

She returned his intent stare as he angled his head. First a prickle from his beard then a veritable firestorm when he pressed his mouth against her thigh in a way that made her want to clamp her legs together and trap him there, trap him so he would eat her, deeply and without restraint. She knew he could give such attention. The practiced eye that allowed her to judge a trainee's progress or an enemy's flaws also permitted her to gauge certain traits such as predatoriness, reach or aggressive penchants. This

Hadisian was a predator if she had ever met one. She would not quash her carnal appetite—she was a grown woman with enough self-knowledge to realize her lust for this man would not go away by itself. It would have to be satiated. But she would be careful.

Without using his hands, he leaned over to put his face very, very close to her sex. Gently blew on it. A wicked gleam lit up his dark gaze when he rolled his eyes up at her, stared for a long time before putting his mouth near her inner thigh, almost against the pubic bone. He stayed there, hovering an inch above her skin, waiting, teasing.

Then, gleaming, his tongue darted for a quick lick.

Opal twitched with thrill.

Another lick, this time closer to the place that had grown hot and wet for the Hadisian. He arched an eyebrow, waited. Licked her again. Higher.

When at last he touched her vulva with his tongue in a sharp and pointed flick, a tiny whip meant for pleasure, Opal shuddered.

Heat from his mouth spread to her belly. To open herself wider, Opal rolled her hips forward and presented him with a feast he could savor with a tender tongue and delicate hands...or devour with teeth and demanding fingers.

Had she held any doubt to which method he would favor?

Opal gasped when he clamped his mouth against her thigh and bit her, sucked hard enough to discolor the skin before turning his attention to her lips, on which he tugged with pitiless but thrilling teeth. She watched for a while as he licked her in long passes interspersed with quick nips along the insides of her thighs. She watched as well while he fucked her with his tongue like a glistening point. In and out. Taking. But she could not watch when the fire built in her lower back, swelled to an inferno that curved her spine. The back of her skull connected with the tile before she realized she had arched away from him. But if she had any intentions of leaving—not that she had—he stopped her with hands like iron bands around her ankles, which he forced wide apart. He must have stood for he raised her legs up in a deep V. He could do what he wanted. She would not stop him.

Leaving her sex throbbing impotently, he kissed her legs, ankles, licked her calves then applied more oil, which he let drip everywhere on her belly and breasts. She knew he had this in him, the tender yet feral attention. The fucking and making love.

The Hadisian then spread her ankles, without reprieve or asking for her sanction, opened her legs wide and stood unmoving long enough that Opal opened her eyes to watch what he did next.

Behind her legs, cock hanging heavy an inch or so above her mons, arms corded and with an ankle in each block-like fist, black hair slicked back and penetrating gaze on her, he stood. A flash of teeth preceded his bite on her calf. Then another. She punctuated each with a small gasp then followed with a moan of unabashed delight. No better lover. Not even the gifted Les, who had moved off-planet the year prior. He had had the stamina, the good looks, but lacked the Hadisian's sheer physical strength

and primitive male dominant nature. Which she loved. Grinning, she arched her back, raised her arms above her head.

Another bite, this time on the inside of her thigh. A quick succession down to the juncture of her thighs. His chin disappeared below her mons. She panted. Waiting. Knowing...

*"Ah!"*

On a snarl, he bit her sex. Just as the pain hit, he licked it away, replaced the sting with glorious liquid fire. She felt the wave rise again. This time, she would come. So close.

His belly constricted with each breath, pectorals bulging, shoulders rippling with loose muscles like thick iron bands. Hair cascaded down one shoulder. Just watching him would probably bring her there. Opal breathed in quick, shallow intakes. Tingles in her clitoris. She would need a mere lick. Just one.

Opal could only watch when, grinning wickedly, he licked her leg from cheek to heel. Then let both her ankles go. Withdrew to the other side of the pool and resumed his initial position, arms wide along the ledge, head resting back against the tiles, eyes closed.

Need knifed her. She had not come.

Her heart sank, her belly tightened when the cruel, cutting realization hit her. He had done it on purpose.

While he was eating out the sexiest, toughest and most annoyingly perfect woman this side of the sun—she tasted as good as she looked too—Dar's situation returned a hundredfold. Fuck, talk about a mood-killer.

First, her goons had come to his home, taken him against his will—in front of everybody and their fucking dogs—and brought him back here to fight in their stupid games. Second, they'd tattooed some Vespasian shit on his face for fuck's sake! And third, he enjoyed a whole lot more than he ought to spending time alone with the woman. And that couldn't do. So he'd taken what he could while he could, and when he knew she was close, close enough to come by merely blowing on her pussy, he'd pulled away. Literally had to tear himself off. And if that hadn't been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. Save burying Nan—rest her soul.

Dar closed his eyes again so he wouldn't have to see the hurt in those violet eyes.

*"If you weren't a Vespasian bitch, I think I'd like you."*

Dar knew he shouldn't feel this way, but when a faint, cool breeze caressed his face to indicate his "trainer" had left, the only satisfaction he felt was that at least she hadn't known how hard it'd been to let her go. Small comfort. And as for the guilt his harsh words and cruel teasing had triggered, he chose to ignore.

He wondered what Nan—rest her soul—would think about that. Something told him she'd have a special slap with his name on it. Nan had pretty much raised him after

his mom decided she didn't want a dead-end job on a dead-end planet and left for greener pastures. His dad, he'd never even met. Sometimes, he missed his Nan so much he felt a physical pain in his chest, acute and lancing. She hadn't died well or easy. In the end, her old and frail body had just given up the fight and let the infection spread from her lungs to the rest of her. Dying of pneumonia was so wrong for his beloved Nan.

"Rest her soul," he murmured as he sank over his head into the hot water.

But chagrin and guilt followed him there.

And God save his.

## Chapter Three

Dar had always thought of himself as a guy in shape. Not because he hung out at gyms and other such nonsense—who the fuck had time for that shit? But because he could unload freighters as fast as the guys in the forklifts did. Sometimes faster. Plus, to live on Hadi, one had to be made of tough stock. So the last five days and the amount of pain and fatigue involved kind of surprised him. As much as his cynical self could be surprised anyway. His “trainer” pretty much drove him into the ground. At least he wasn’t the only fighter sweating like a pig and sporting various shades of blue on his arms and legs. And the thing was, she never once raised her voice or acted in any other way than cool politeness and professional indifference. But he could tell he’d pissed her off good. Every time she thought he wasn’t looking—but was because the last thing he wanted was to lose sight of the dangerous woman and her damn stick, plus she was some hot—she’d cut a glance at him. And if those wounded violet eyes didn’t just skewer him to the spot! So it became obvious to the rest that they were all suffering because of something he’d done. Great. Making friends already. Not that he needed the bunch of buffoons.

First, there was the unofficial couple, the ever-smiling Makala and that bitchy redhead Holly, who kept bickering and taunting each other. Only just that morning, he’d suggested they have a good go to get it out of their systems. Holly hadn’t been impressed. Fuck her.

Second, a pair of Vespasian crooks, Thomasz and Adrian, who weren’t brothers but looked as if they could be, shaven heads, tattoos all over and not just on their faces—he’d finally taken a look at his own and cursed until he was blue in the face. They’d tattooed some kind of black flames pattern all around his left eye and temple, some of the points going up to his hairline. Made him look like a fucking busker! Anyway. Back to the pair of thugs. Those two he’d keep in front at all times, backbiting assholes. And fuck them too.

The rest? Pathetic sheep not worth his time.

But it hadn’t all been useless training and stick waving. He’d learned a thing or two about the way of things around the coliseum. The day before, after they’d left the galley following a nice hot bath to soothe his poor battered body, he’d noticed a small detail he hadn’t before. The guards would start by taking them to the stasis chambers—a glorified meat freezer with fancy high-tech medical gear and coffin-shaped pods. Then they’d put the fighters to sleep with a shot from a dermagun in the shoulder. Opal had done it herself the day before, her violet eyes the last thing he remembered. As he waited for the meds to conk him out, he’d started to commit their routine to memory.

After the shots, the guards would all leave except for one. So they only kept one guy on duty while fighters “slept”. Good to know.

And one other thing he knew. He had a day to find a way out before he got himself skewered by whoever he was going to “fight” at the games. Not that he intended to die the next day. They expected him to, so he wasn’t about to be that agreeable. He’d make sure to outlast everybody else. If only to spite that cock-sucking Sanguis.

As he presently finished drying himself and putting on the white garment fighters were supposed to wear around practices, a man came over to the baths. He wore that thing Opal had called a “toga” – a goddamn dress, not that he was well placed to talk since he was wearing a skirt. The guy was all oily smile and curtsy with Opal. They entered into a brief conversation and just from her tight stance and narrowed eyes, he knew the man hadn’t been bringing good news.

After the man left, one last look at Dar – returned twofold and with a curl of lip for good measure – she turned to the gladiators and adjusted her uniform. “Praetor Sanguis has invited you all to a feast in honor of the coming games.”

If she’d announced they were all getting their hands and ears chopped off, she wouldn’t have looked more pissed off...in her characteristic cool way of course.

Holly visibly blanched, and for once Makala didn’t tease her. What the fuck was that about?

“I’m not going to some goddamn party, lady,” Dar remarked as he dropped the towel and raked his hair from his face. Should get the damn thing cut. “Tell him to piss off.”

“You don’t tell the praetor to ‘piss off’,” Adrian remarked waspishly. Dar didn’t like the little shit, reminded him too much of a schoolyard bully.

“Which way you want to fall, asswipe?” Dar snapped. “‘Cause I’m good with both hands.”

“No,” Opal went on as though he hadn’t spoken, all blazing violet eyes. “Nor does one make him wait.”

Thomasz showed crooked teeth when he smiled. “And they have women at these things.” As Dar knew they would, both “brothers” exchanged hungry grins.

He was about to voice his opinion on that when he spotted Opal looking at him, jaw muscle twitching fast. Oh? Got a little bit of the green monster working her, had she? Was still chewing on the pool incident, was she? Ha.

Dar nodded emphatically. “Women, you said?”

He had no idea what sort of reaction he was going for, or even why he wanted one in the first place. There must have been something in the water that made him a testosterone-stupefied asshole. But somehow, Opal turning on her heels and marching off made him grin.

Definitely an angle he could work.



With guards flanking their little group, she led them to a section of the underground complex he hadn't seen so far, up several sets of stairs and out onto a long covered walkway that extended from the coliseum proper to a collection of stone buildings in a mixed style of old world and fancy glass and steel tubes. As if some demented urban planner had plopped half of ancient Rome into the city center of a futuristic megalopolis. Crazy-ass urban planning this was. He didn't like it one bit. Too much fancy shit that did nothing useful.

When he turned to check their location compared to what little he knew, he realized the building flanked the coliseum with a huge terrace overlooking the fight grounds. In other words, the VIP boxes. Beyond the highest roof, spaceports like giant silver grapes atop long graceful pillars glimmered temptingly. If he had one chance, just one... He'd steal himself some shuttle and get the hell off this planet. He logged the location and distance of the spaceports in his mind. Along with Opal's seemingly weak spot for him.

When they reached the VIP boxes level, they emerged onto a crowded terrace where people turned as one to watch their arrival. Men in "togas", women barely wearing anything at all. On Hadi, if one didn't wear long sleeves, with the pitiless sun in the summer or the harsh winter, one would be very, very sorry. But here on Vespas, anyone could go around fucking naked, it would seem. So indolence came with the good climate. Nothing to do with themselves, no weather to worry about, water to haul from other worlds, fuel to ration. Just a great, balmy, easy life of parties and men in dresses and perfect teeth. Fucking A.

And he could tell they all watched him for some reason. Never seen a Hadisian up close? Anger bubbled up his chest. Now he knew how animals in zoos felt. It sucked.

Slaves—no one he knew wore silver bands around their necks for the fuck of it—in white loose gowns milled around a large central table where had been displayed the largest assortment of foods he'd ever seen in one place. He could've fed a small town with the stuff on that table.

From the crowd emerged a man he'd seen before on his first day. Two actually. The commander who'd slipped the manacles on him was here too. He raised his glass in a silent salute to Dar, who mouthed the words "fuck off". The commander only grinned. Cock-sucker.

"Seleria, we were just talking about you," the praetor said, his eyes on Dar. He licked his lips repeatedly. Dar didn't like that for some reason. Creepy bastard.

Sanguis raised his hand and reverent silence fell. "You all know my stable handler Opal Seleria, the daughter of Vespas' best bloodline of gladiators, and who continues to bring honor and distinction to my house." Sanguis smiled, gave Dar a pronounced once-over. "But you may have noticed a new fighter. Please let me introduce you to Dar Skara, a Hadisian slave who is my chosen damnati for the games."

Was it his imagination or did Opal just clench her teeth? She appeared her usual stoical self, all poise and calm, but somehow he could tell she wasn't too happy with something. Maybe she just didn't like parties. That made two of them.

"A Hadisian," a woman said to Sanguis. She wore nothing more than a bunch of blue ribbons strategically placed on her emaciated body. "How you treat us, Praetor."

Ass-kissing anyone?

If somebody would've told him he'd one day be standing in the middle of a crowd of Vespasian upper crust, being looked at by women—and men, someone please shoot his ass dead—as if he were a goddamn piece of meat, he would've kicked them in the ass. Not much he could do about it now though, other than glower at anyone who came too close. One woman even went so far as to approach him, eyeball him up and down then comment to her friend how big and scary he was and how she'd heard once that Hadisian men sometimes fought over their women. Literally fought.

"Your Vespasian men would too," he growled, his gaze on Sanguis. "If they had any balls."

While both women blushed excitedly and decided he was the most interesting thing that had crawled out of Hadi, Sanguis gave his glass to the brownnoser in blue ribbons and approached. By his side, he felt Opal tense. So there was history here. Another good thing to know.

"Quite the spirit you have," Sanguis murmured through his teeth. "Even for one of your kind."

Dar entertained himself with the vision of slamming his fist into the oily smile and breaking all of the asshole's perfect teeth. Make a nice necklace of them maybe. But he wasn't a moron. The asshole in question had access to all kinds of weapons and painful means of attitude adjustment, so Dar kept his mouth shut. For now. Plus, there was something perverse and menacing about the way he looked at Dar.

"Hadisians are all the same," Opal put in coolly. Still pissed, huh?

"I disagree," Sanguis replied, drawing closer. Dar could smell the man's cologne. A vein pulsed at his temple. "This one is uniquely fascinating. I am looking forward to watching you fight, Dar."

Dar only stared through his bangs and tried to keep himself from picking the man up and tossing him over the railing into the coliseum below. He'd probably scream like a girl all the way down.

Sanguis' smile widened. "But such spirit is not unheard of. Only just this morning, I was enjoying a young Hadisian woman...you raise them fit and firm on Hadi. And once properly motivated, very receptive as well."

Dar's heart skipped a beat. He tried to keep himself from giving the jerk a reaction, but there was just so much taunting a man could take. "That's called 'rape' where I come from, you greasy Vespasian pig."

Opal gasped.

As though someone had turned the volume off, conversation died almost instantly. Faces turned. Fear became a palpable thing. Something brewed in the air and Dar wasn't sure he wanted to know what it was.

“You would call me a pig, damnati?” Sanguis said through a pleasant smile. “Me? When you Hadisians live in caves? Like beasts? When you scrounge refuse from other worlds to bring back to your dens, when you have not even the most basic spacefaring capabilities and must rely on others?”

He backed from Dar, still smiling, eyes scanning the uneasy-looking crowd. Sanguis pulled a slender dagger from within his toga, marched for the central table and yanked a young slave by the back of her white gown. He whirled her around, kissed her cheek.

Then he slit her throat.

Dar only had time to curse when arterial blood arced right over the table in three powerful jets then weakened to dribbles as the young woman noiselessly slumped to the ground. Crimson spread on the front of her white gown.

A single step forward was all he could take when Opal barred his way with an outstretched arm. “How many more must die for your pride?” she snarled under her breath.

He swore—to Nan’s memory even—that the strain on his heart would kill him right then and there. For the first time in his life, he couldn’t do shit about anything. Not about his own situation and not about that dead girl lying on the floor in a pool of her blood. Because of what he’d said. He couldn’t do a single thing. Not one. The powerlessness threatened to make him a raving lunatic. He wanted to kill Sanguis with his bare hands. Not just hurt him bad, but kill him, tear his limbs off, gouge his eyes out, break his jaw, bash his skull. That crazy bastard. The fucking, demented monster.

As if nothing had happened, Sanguis put his bejeweled dagger on the table and stepped over the dead slave, grabbed a piece of fruit from the table and popped it into his mouth. Mmm-ing and nodding, he retrieved his glass from the brownnoser, who stood shock-still, huge eyes fixed on the young woman.

A drop of blood still hung from the dagger’s point then fell to seep into the white tablecloth. The stain grew to the size of a token.

He knew then.

At that exact point, Dar Skara understood one thing about Vespas culture. Something he’d never noticed, never cared enough to note. Not all of them were arrogant and cruel bullies. Not all of them agreed with their foreign policy. If he’d always put them in the same basket, the entire population of them, all fifty million assholes, he no longer did. For starters, they had decent-enough people. Opal was an okay lady, even if he still owed her one for humiliating him publicly. That woman in the blue outfit as well, who later on tonight would probably suck Sanguis’ dick, but who would only do so because she was afraid of him. Vespasians’ fuel was fear. They were afraid not of God as Dar was, of some common enemy, of distant Earth or more powerful races nearby. Vespasians were afraid of one another. Dar shook his head at the madness, at the futility. What good was it to subjugate other worlds when they feared their own most of all?

While a trio of guards dragged the dead girl away, more slaves dropped to their hands and knees and scrubbed the stone floor clean with stark white cloths that soon turned pink, vermillion, scarlet and every other shade of red he couldn't name. So much blood. Within minutes, conversations started anew, people laughed with that shrill, nervous edge of those who didn't want to anger the crazy boss, the schoolyard bully – nothing, *nothing* pissed him off more than bullying.

When Sanguis threw him a casual glance, Dar made sure to let his eyes do the talking. If there was justice in this mad world, the fucker would pay for what he'd done to that girl. Dar would see to it. He usually didn't care enough to worry about justice. He did this time. That slave didn't have a name to him, barely had a face. But she would matter. He'd make her death matter to someone if it was the last thing he did.

By his side, Opal stood lance-straight, proud profile and impeccable white hair combed back in a shiny ponytail. So different from everyone around yet the same pride. With her body language, she implicitly agreed what Sanguis had just done was wrong to the nth degree, just as Dar thought the guy ought to have his balls stapled to the goddamn wall. But she wouldn't do a thing about it. She had the power but wouldn't use it.

"And you call *us* beasts," he growled for her benefit but without turning toward her.

She stared at her boots for a while, cleared her throat. "We all have our demons."

"He's no demon. He's just a man. Mortal like the rest of us."

She didn't reply. He couldn't blame her. Not a fucking thing to add to the sorry thing that had just happened.

Within minutes, forced effervescence drowned the last remains of what Sanguis had done. Dar crossed his arms and waited for it all to end. As much as he hated the stasis pods, all he wanted right now was just to lie in his and let the dermagun put him out of his misery. Fucking Vespasians.

After a while, Opal moved off to talk to some old men clustered along the railing. Early evening sun cast rays on her head and made her ponytail a cascade of white gold he longed to touch, run his fingers through or maybe wrap around a fist while they fucked quick and hard. Torn between his hatred for her mores and his carnal hunger for the warrior woman, Dar couldn't help but admire her stance, the way she'd angle her head when she talked or how she'd cross her arms and roll from her heels to the balls of her feet. Sexy.

The taste of her pussy invaded his mind again, as it had since he'd tasted her. Tongue-fucking that woman had been one of the best things in his life. No doubt fucking her for real would be even better.

While everyone else could enjoy a glass of something, he got to stand there like an ass, murder on his mind and fire in his balls, and get prodded and questioned, groped – *Oh, touch his arms, Linia, they're so hard.* – and gawked at for close to an hour until one wondered if he was "proportional", at which point he told them to fuck off.

Two full glasses in hand, Opal came to him, exchanged polite nonsense with the two women then managed to send them on their way without either one realizing they'd just been blown off.

"You expect me to thank you?" he growled, accepting the glass she offered him. Some fruity concoction when he wanted something strong enough to dull the edge of knowing he maybe had one day to live. Damn Vespasians managed to ruin that too.

All that blood on the girl's white gown. She couldn't have been older than what, nineteen, twenty? If that. Dar shook his head but the vision remained. A kid.

Without looking at him, Opal sipped at her glass, grimaced. "I expect nothing from you."

"Still pouting from the other day? Pouting is for kids, lady. Grow up."

Dar could swear he heard her teeth grinding. Any other time, he would've loved teasing her even more, maybe get another taste. But tonight, with these fuckers around, he just wanted darkness and oblivion.

Around them, most everyone was busy with either food, drinks or someone else's garment. The sun wasn't even all the way down yet and already people were getting frisky. He could tell these "parties" of the praetor's had the potential to degenerate pretty damn fast. Well, there'd already been a murder, not that it counted to these chicken shits. He wanted no part of it.

"Take me back to my cage," he said, plopping the glass on the floor and straightening. If it wouldn't have meant some poor kid had to get down on her knees and wash the mess, he would've dropped the glass and stepped over the broken bits.

Opal nodded, waved the guard away—never very far, those guys.

He followed her out of the fancy party, for a moment enjoyed her V-shaped back, the way her ass and legs looked in the tight leather-like uniform, and entered the darkening underground complex beneath the coliseum. Their steps reverberated against the rock floor. Shadows crawled along the base of the walls in their wake, twisted on the floor at each corner. In the distant light of fluorescents, her hair looked stark white instead of the more blonde white. The skin on her shoulder gleamed like satin.

The pads of his fingers tingled as he imagined what it'd feel like to run his hand again over her hard and strong body. Get another bite into her, another lick at her sweet cunt. Mmm. And just his luck to get a stupid hard-on and no place to put it. Damn skirt. Damn Vespasians.

She entered the stasis chamber, turned to tell him something but must have noticed his "condition" since she faltered, cleared her throat then rummaged around the medical kits for the dermagun.

"Perhaps you should have stayed at the party," she remarked without turning around. "There would have been women there to...erm, keep you company."

"That's what you guys call these things? Parties? Does a slave die every time there's one?"

She cursed, for the first time since he'd met her losing her cool. She tossed the tray of medical tools across the table where it clanged against the wall and spilled the contents on the floor in a series of clatters and clangs. The dermagun fell to the floor as well. He noted the position and angle. He wouldn't get another chance that good.

Maybe he wouldn't be staying the night after all. Ha.

"Why did you not shut your mouth?" she demanded. "She died because of you!"

Dar positioned himself just inside the doorway. She wouldn't be getting out of this room. Not on two legs anyway.

"No," he threw back. "That kid died because Sanguis is a blood-thirsty prick with a couple of fried brain cells."

"All you had to do was be silent," she went on, throwing her hands in the air. "Your stupid pride cost that girl her life!"

Instead of losing his hard-on, it tightened painfully. This place was getting to his brain.

"And do what, huh? Be a good little Vespasian whore like that woman with the blue outfit and say nothing? Even I could tell she wanted to puke. You're all like her, goddamn wimps."

Anger narrowed her eyes to murderous slits. "We are all bitches or whores or wimps to you? It never crossed your mind we do what we have to because it is our duty?"

"Duty my ass! Is it what you're doing right now? Your 'duty'?"

"Yes!"

"Well, you look like you got a problem with your 'duty', lady. Don't blame me if you work for a sadistic asshole. Blame yourself."

"I was born to train gladiators as my mother did and her mother before her. That is what I do!"

"Then you were born the slave of a slave! You're just too damn proud to admit it!"

She stalked up to him, arm cocked back for one hell of a punch. Before she could bust his chops again—the woman could put some arm behind her fist—he caught the hand in midair, tugged hard enough to overbalance her then sent her waltzing against the wall. This was his chance. No guards. Just her and him. She was going down.

Opal hit shoulder-first, stumbled. A second and he was on her, crushed her to the wall with his hips so he could manage those dangerous fists. He'd take her out then use the dermagun just in case. Finding his way back outside would be a bitch, but he wasn't about to use Opal—awake—as a guide. As unconscious hostage though...hell yeah!

But as he forced Opal against the wall, he realized he had no intention of subduing her. His fired-up system had decided on another course of action.

## Chapter Four

Opal gasped when he pushed her against the wall and pinned her there, one wrist planted high above her head, the other in a steel grip as he forced her arm outward to join its twin. She could best him in any fight, but in a competition of sheer strength, she had no chance. A stark-white rictus except for the broken tooth glistened behind his beard. Twin black slits had replaced the damnati's piercing eyes. She waited for his next attack, panting from the strain of fighting him with all her being and all her heart.

The attack never came. Instead, he shocked her with a kiss.

The collision had the effect of a splash of water on a burning hull. Instantaneous. All-consuming. It evaporated her restraint, her cool logic, her inhibitions. Even erased the last time she had tasted the man's tongue.

The kind of clash that melted one's defenses, reduced one's mental processes to little more than scattered thoughts like dew in the sun. Unable to stop herself, Opal arched her pelvis against his. A hard lump pressed into her belly. His chest crushed her breasts, pinned her against the cool concrete. Such contrast to his burning skin.

Yet as soon as their mouths connected, he pushed off her, stumbled back a few steps. With a rough tug, he ripped the skirt off, tossed it behind him. Revealed himself in all his maleness and strength. Muscles played loosely under his tanned skin, twitched and banded when he took a step sideways to block the door.

Magnificent.

Opal only had eyes for her adversary because this is what he had become in the span of a moment. From slave and damnati, he had turned into equal and fellow fighter.

She peeled herself off the wall. Without taking her gaze off him unclipped her belt then yanked the split tunic up and over her head. She had never taken it off so quickly. In only her boots, she straightened to face him, offered her nakedness as he had done to her, watched his eyes flare and his tongue run behind his teeth as he took a long, appreciative look. A flare to his nostrils, he sucked in a breath, grumbled deep in his chest. Had he caught her scent? Her nipples hardened into painful points, mirrored in his thick cock, which hung low over his thighs in a dark and glistening invitation.

The adversary watched her, feral intensity, not missing a detail. His thick frame still blocking the doorway. But she had no intention of running away. She would not shy away from this fight. She *wanted* this fight.

He slammed his hand on the control panel, killed the fluorescents inside the stasis chamber. A soft amber glow from the corridor filtered in at an angle and haloed his muscular silhouette, lengthened his shadow, which touched her feet. As if he were

reaching out to her in this subtle way. The symbolism tightened her muscles. She crouched slightly.

As two predators would, they began to circle each other, arms loose at their sides, gazes fixed on the other, breathing in slowly, measured step after measured step, one full rotation, two. He may have lacked finesse, but the sheer brute strength emanating from the huge man more than made up for professional training. In her practiced eye, she saw the attack coming.

Dar dipped his shoulder slightly. Then he charged.

Opal gasped when he changed tactics at the last possible second and instead extended his arm, caught her around the shoulders and sent her flying back over the table. She rolled over it, tucked her arm in to flip back on her feet. The table between them, he pretended to come for her left, feigned to the right.

Opal grinned. She knew that one.

Before he could follow his feints with a real attack, she leaned back against the wall and kicked the table with both feet, sent it crashing against him. He took it with a grunt and a curse. Hard and fast, Opal followed in with a leap over the corner of the table and a roundhouse kick aimed at his chin. She knew – hoped – he would evade her. Which would mean two things. One, her training had sunk in, and two, he would turn out to be a gifted and powerful opponent. And lover.

Dar snapped his head back to avoid her foot but caught it before it touched the ground. With a gasp, he whirled her around, trapped her against the table with his body and long arms wrapped around her waist.

“You think I’d fall for that?” he snarled through her hair.

Opal half growled, half moaned when he spared a hand and cupped her mons from behind, long fingers reaching down over her sex. Without a trace of inhibition she hooked her knee on the table to widen herself.

He did not seem to require another invitation as his fingers parted her, sank deep. Opal reached behind her, fisted his long hair then forced his face against the back of her shoulder, hoping he would understand. He did. Heat heralded his mouth. He bit her.

“Ah!”

She had for days lived with the agony of his mouth’s burning touch. Nights of fantasizing he finished what he had started at the baths. Nights of going to sleep with her fingers in herself. No more. She wanted the real thing.

Her voice resounded when he pushed his cock against her lower back while his fingers rubbed in and out, in and out, found her clitoris then teased her mercilessly. She arched her butt up against him. She wanted more.

Before he could translate her brusque movement into an attack, Opal drove her elbow into his side, evaded his hands then pushed him off with the ball of her foot. He whirled on the spot, all frustrated male vigor and furious combatant, and sent the table



across the room with a swipe of his bear-paw of a hand. It clattered against the wall then fell to its side.

Knowing she played with fire and loving every second, Opal leaped back over the first stasis pod then the second and third. He stalked her across the large room with angry whacks that got rid of any obstacle, sending smaller things crashing and rattling heavier ones. Just as he reached her near the fourth stasis pod – Makala’s – Opal took a run and aimed a flying side kick at him.

Quicker than she had seen him move so far, he ducked under her kick, let her foot arc harmlessly a hair’s breadth over his head before making a quick grab for her arm, which she avoided by leaning far on her heels. Too far. With a shocked gasp – she had never overestimated her abilities before – she bumped against another stasis pod and would have fallen had Dar not held on to her wrist.

A split second after he steadied her, he reeled her in against his chest, captured her mouth in a burning kiss that Opal reciprocated a hundredfold.

As she had fantasized for days, she filled her fists with his hair and rubbed his face all over hers, pulled down so he could kiss her there, which he did, demanded in a harsh voice that he take her breasts into his mouth, demand he met and surpassed. She let out a loud yelp when he bit her on a breast, quickly licked her feverish nipple before sucking on it in long, noisy draws. Opal arched over the stasis pod, used it as an anchor to plaster her pelvis against his.

While she hung on to his hair, he nudged her knee aside with his own. Exacted a cry of thrill when he claimed her pussy to rub round and round. She watched him lick the pad of his thumb then return to his task with renewed fire. He moistened his finger once more. She could watch no more when a wave surged over her. Tossed her into a lava-hot sea of impulses. Climax-induced fever descended over her. She cried out. His hand never slowed. Another surge took her. Another. Then again.

Reeling from the explosions of ecstasy, she used the pod to lift a leg and wrap it around Dar’s middle, cramped her muscles as hard as she could to force him against her. He had to take her. Now. Like this, up against a stasis pod.

But unlike other lovers who had barely managed her, he never moved and instead kept his thumb on her throbbing clitoris and his mouth around her nipple. Just as the pleasure rapidly deepened into pain, he abandoned both, gripped her by the hip. He would take her on his own time, not hers. Opal had never known such thrill.

On a low grunt, he took her.

Dar had never fucked a woman this hard before. He wasn’t exactly a small fellow and had to be careful where he put his elbows and how he angled himself. He had at least one hundred pounds over his lovers. Not this one. She took it all and then some. And he sure as hell had never fought one for the sheer honor of doing to her what both of them wanted. Women ordinarily told him yes or no, depending if he’d been a good boy or not. But Opal Seleria, she’d made him earn it all right. And it was an honor, a

privilege and reward watching her come at the end of his fingers. He'd been burning for it ever since he'd teased then abandoned her by the baths. Tortured himself in the process.

She cried out. Fuck. It'd been his name. She'd cried out his name while she came.

A split second before he took her, Dar allowed himself a second to look at her. That sweet, wet pussy the color and shine of wet candy looked so inviting, so mind-blowing he could've stared at her all day, or spent hours eating her out and screwing her with his mouth. He'd almost forgotten his dick throbbed for release and his balls were about to fucking explode. Almost forgot she was the enemy. A willing character in this demented play he was stuck in, a spoke in the mad wheel.

But right now, with his cock deep inside the gorgeous blonde, with her incredibly muscled and powerful thighs cramped around his waist so he'd take her harder, deeper, Dar really didn't care where she was from and what planet she called home. All he wanted was to lose himself in her willing flesh, take her hard and deep and ride her all night. She looked willing and able to last that long too.

After the initial rush of his first push—she was tight and deep and wet—he gathered his wits and pulled out to the glans. The look of fury on her! Dar grinned, knowing he must have been more scary than handsome. Even on a good day with proper clothes and a bottle of something nice and strong, he probably was more scary than handsome to his women. He bucked his hips hard. The sudden penetration flared her eyes, rounded her glistening mouth in a perfect, silent O. Then sound hit. On the in-breath she gasped nice and loud the way he liked it.

"Ah!"

So he gave it to her again, thrust to the end of her and himself. Vaginal muscles tightened around his dick and destroyed his ability to think. All he wanted was to take her again and again. To hell with everything else. Even his impending freedom. That dermagun was still where it'd fallen. It wasn't going anywhere. All in due time.

Suddenly, whatever she leaned on gave and spilled them to the floor in a tangled mess of limbs and hair. Her ponytail had come undone. He abandoned her hip so he could grip that glorious white-blond mane and wrap a fist around it. Gave a good tug. She didn't seem to mind. So he wrapped it around his fist twice. Fuck, it was long and shiny and perfect. Just like the rest of her.

"Again," she snarled, teeth flashing. "Again."

"You've been wanting it, huh, gladiator?" he taunted for no better reason than to admire the rage in her dazzling violet eyes. Rage that transferred to her hands. She tilled his back deep enough to make him hiss. Fuck, he was loving this!

"As have you, damnati," she sneered.

He never had time to parry. With a forceful buck and the heel of her boot in the crook of his hip, she dislodged him, sent him slamming back against one of the stasis pods. Cursing, he flipped over and barely managed to stay upright when she used the end of the pod as though it were a pommel horse and swung both feet up and over. He

caught them in the belly, *oomph-ed* a curse. But if she thought all it took to bring him down was a fancy kick...

Dar crouched low, rolled onto his back while simultaneously kicking her foot from under her. She went down on one knee. He was there to greet her, gripped her by the hair, yanked her down on top of him. She moaned when he crushed his mouth to hers. Teeth knocked. Tongues dueled. But he wasn't done with her. Not even close.

He growled, "Let me get a taste of that," while he seized her by her hips, forced her up, up above his head. Her sweet, wet cunt was what he had in mind. Before she could parry or block, he snaked his arms between her legs, wrapped them back over her thighs then plastered his face to her pussy. All wet and smelling of woman. Nothing better.

She shook from trying to fight him off. He felt the tremors in her thick thighs. Even while she moaned and rolled her hips, she fought for dominance.

Dar licked her cunt as hard as he could, drew on it, pressed his tongue in then sucked her hard little clit until she literally shook.

She cursed. "Oh! Oh good fortune... Yes! Yes!"

Knowing she wasn't going anywhere, he spared a hand to rub her cleft from behind. Rub her. Finger-fuck her. One finger at a time. Two. She crushed her pussy to his face. He took it all. Everything she gave and then some. Honey rewarded him, hot and plentiful. It was everywhere. He licked greedily.

"Give it to me!" he ordered while he reached up behind her back, managed to fist the end of her long hair, which dangled and brushed against his belly. He started pulling down, forced her back to arc. "Give me what you got."

From the angle, he knew Opal had to abandon his hair—on which she'd been yanking nonstop—and plant her hands on the floor for support. Still he pulled on her hair, used it to bend her back like a catapult, making her nice and wide for him. Her thighs widened, her weight pressed on his upper chest. When he looked above her distended pussy and dark blonde mons, all he saw were abs stretched to their limits crowned by a pair of breasts proudly pointing up. Nipples hard-looking and rosy. And if that didn't make him want to fuck them! His balls constricted at the idea...fuck her breasts while she lay on her back, making a nice home for him with her mounds crushed in her hands, parted lips glistening as she'd take him in, cum like silk ribbons linking them. Dar's back cramped just thinking about it.

Despite the awkward angle and the death grip he had on her, she managed to scoot backward until she knelt poised over his cock. He released her hair out of pure ulterior motives. He knew what she meant to do. Violet eyes like lasers, she took him in.

Dar growled a curse then let out a long sigh. God, she felt good. So good. Felt right.

She rolled her hips and undulated her spine and kept on forcing his cock ever deeper into her. Dar could watch it sink to his heart's content. Nothing beat watching a gal bounce on him, breasts loose and free, hair like silky veils.

"Is this what you wanted, Hadisian?" she murmured as she cramped her vaginal muscles.

He nearly blacked out. "Fuck...y-yeah. That's what I wanted." He bucked under her. "That what you wanted, Opal? Huh?"

She smiled, tucked her bottom lip behind her teeth. Moaned delightfully.

But the sight of her rosy flesh stretched tight around him evaporated the last few coherent thoughts. A haze like the one he experienced in fights obscured his vision until he couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't feel anything but the woman sitting astride him, taking him deep, fucking both their brains out. Well, he wasn't about to let her have all the fun. Plus, there was the dermagun – right by her ankle.

With a potent roll of her hips, she replaced the concept of escape, the idea of retribution with fire. Her fire, her woman's strength and vigor. Dar forgot everything.

Her voice rose as she likewise did over his lap. Then plunged when she slammed back down against him. Ah. Ah. Higher, louder.

"Dar," she moaned over and over. His name had never sounded so fucking good. So he repaid her in kind. She became Opal in his mouth and no longer "his trainer" or "that Vespasian".

Slamming back against him. His cock pushing into her, her lips stretched, the honey coating everything. Smells of it, the memory of its taste.

He couldn't take it anymore. He was about to come. Dar squeezed his eyes shut, dug his fingers into the crooks of her hips.

"That's it!" he growled. "Take it...take it."

A small burning sensation along his thigh flared his eyes wide.

Opal was settling back on his lap, his cock sheathed to the hilt in her warm, welcoming flesh, cum choked back by the sight of her sad violet eyes riveted to him. And in her hand, the dermagun like the gleaming betrayal it was.

Fuck.

And he couldn't even hate her for it. Should, but didn't. She'd just beaten him to the punch.

"I am truly sorry," she whispered. "I wish circumstances were different."

"So do I," he pushed through his deadened lips, mumbled really. Had she even heard him? Had he spoken for real or only in his head?

Dar's brain clouded, his vision as well. Somewhere he heard a woman's voice, soothing, felt hands finishing him in brisk strokes. Barely able to feel it, Dar came on a low grunt. Then everything went black.

## Chapter Five

Guilt was for the weak-minded. Those who lacked focus and pragmatism.

She had been raised, trained to believe this. Was she all those things? Was she weak, negligent or unreasonable? She did not believe so, yet guilt gnawed at her since she had shot the unsuspecting Hadisian with the dermagun and watched his gradual descent into a drug-induced sleep that smoothed the lines on his face and squeezed at her heart. Maybe she was all these things. Maybe she was weak.

She presently scratched at the back of her neck. Too hot to fight. They should postpone the games. She suspected her motivation for a delay had little to do with weather and everything to do with a certain Hadisian.

Already sweating in her full armor and helmet shaped in a dragon's head, both in the black and red of Sanguis' house, Opal stood with her back to the mammoth gates, which would soon open to allow her the honor of parading her gladiators around the coliseum. Thunderous applause and trumpets blaring, hovering videobots relaying the event all over Vespas. Praetor Sanguis would stand proud in the dignitaries tribunes, by his side the upper crust of society, members of the senate and, through holographic link, even the emperor himself and his entourage.

Yet she felt none of the pride she usually did. None of the accomplishment either. She would lose a fighter today. Predestined loss. Such a waste of precious life. One for whom she had come to care for on levels deeper than trainer and trainee. Or mere lovers.

What they had shared...

She had had to resort to all of her strength to hoist the unconscious man into his stasis pod. Had probably pulled something in her sore back as well. Unless the spasms were remnants of their momentous coupling. To her shock, after she had administered the drugs, no rage had shone in his black eyes. Only regret. Sentiment she shared.

Regardless of their numerous differences, even with the mores and light-years separating their cultures and homeworlds, despite the veil of hate through which he often stared at her, she enjoyed the Hadisian's presence. Enjoyed this stubborn yet honorable man who would not attack an opponent in the back. Her pragmatic inner voice scoffed at the notion even while the rest of her warmed at the thought of such empirical notion as fair play. Such a contrast to the coarse rest of Dar Skara. Intoxicating mix.

But he was damnati. And damnati died.

Hidden by the helmet, she allowed a tear to roll down her cheek. A small agnition to the woman in her who wanted circumstances to be different. Who so desperately wished for it.

To regain some aplomb, she surveyed her gladiators. Black and red polyurethane armor glimmered against oiled skin that ranged in tones from ivory or ochre to obsidian. Underneath the armor, each fighter wore a white knee-length tunic of genuine linen. Sanguis spared no expense on his house's appearance. She recognized them by shape and height since they all wore lion-faced helmets that obscured their faces down to their chins. For dramatic effect as much as for safety. She noticed then two were missing. She cursed under her breath. Had the attendants not finished their work? She would have a word with them.

"Where is Holly?" she inquired while her eyes searched not for the redhead but for the tall Hadisian.

The brothers snorted a mean sort of laugh while Makala stared daggers at her through the slits in his helmet. "She had to stay at the feast last night. On the praetor's orders..."

Holly.

She felt her blood pressure lower to dangerous levels. Stars popped and fizzed at the edge of her peripheral vision. Carelessness was unlike her. After she had dealt with the Hadisian, she had gone straight to bed and had assumed the others would be brought back to the stasis chamber later. She never assumed anything. A rare lapse in judgment for her. Sanguis had wasted no time, the sordid man.

Gladiators were her responsibility, her charges, and his interference could no longer be tolerated. How could she have been so irresponsible, after months of subtly – then not so subtly – keeping him away from Holly? Good fortune only knew what he had done.

She had never been prone to anger. Cool logic usually achieved better results. Not today. "I will take care of it after the introductions."

"Take care of what?" the Hadisian snapped behind her.

"Now is not the time!" she retorted. "I have other –"

The rest of her angry retort died on her lips as Opal turned to the man's voice as if a magnet had been attached to her helmet. A gasp left her. Except for the eyes, she might not have recognized him. But then again, who else she knew stood over six and half feet of pure muscle?

He stood in the doorway leading out of the training room, his physical presence and sheer animal charisma forced her back by a step. The attendants had shaved his beard and tied his hair back from his face in a half tail that rendered his tattoo almost lifelike, oiled his thick body and strapped the custom-made uniform. Instead of the black and red of house Sanguis, he wore gold. For greater contrast against blood. Bits of synthetic leather armor made to resemble metal on his shoulders, lower arms and legs created tantalizing flashes of light. He held his helmet under an arm, and if she thought

she had seen his scowls, nothing prepared her for the blank look in his dark eyes. She would have welcomed the rage, the animosity, anything. But not this. His eyes resembled two chips of black ice. Unsurprising after what she had done the night before...

How could he do this to her, muddle something that had once been so clear? The comfortable constant in her life. She trained gladiators. That was her duty, which she did well and with pride. After their three years with Sanguis, those who had earned their freedom went on to become something else. It was the way of things. Everyone had a part in the large play of life. She had hers. The Hadisian had his.

"Take care of what?" he repeated.

Anger swelled to unprecedented proportions. Her breath quickened. She had to consciously keep her face from betraying emotions. She had to retrieve Holly and this stubborn man was not helping. "You are ready."

"No," he snarled, threw a murderous glare at the brothers until they made room for him at the beginning of the line. "But the fuckers out there better be." He shoved his helmet down on his head and ignored her superbly.

A pair of guards marched up to her, saluted, then with a nod activated the massive doors. Cleverly hidden behind faux-antique bronze work, the hydraulic system pushed outward both thick doors, allowed a widening blade of sunlight to pierce the relative shadows of the waiting hall, expanding until she could spot a sliver of audience across the giant coliseum. The roar of voices washed over her. She closed her eyes, raised her repaired pila above her head then motioned for the gladiators to follow as she walked underneath the raising portcullis.

Fifty thousand voices roared in a thunderous cheer, fifty thousand pairs of hands clapped madly while the equal number of feet stomped the tribunes, with even more in the comfort of their homes all over Vespas. Colors—azure sky, multihued crowd, crimson pennants and banners fluttering in the wind, the giant awning suspended over the dignitaries. Sounds—voices, the distant whirr of hoverbots, the presenter's frenetic announcements over the monstrous speakers, pristine and for now bloodless sand crunching under her gladiators' feet. Smells of jet fuel, dust, oiled bodies following her, of sweat and excitement.

When the presenter announced Sanguis' damnati, the clamor of approval nearly deafened her. Hadisians were always popular. But hers—since when had he become *her* Hadisian?—seemed to be even more so. His death during any one of the three imposed fights would be even more remarkable. Opal squeezed her eyes shut to sever the vision.

*Duty to the empire*, she chanted in her head. Guilt and regret drowned what small comfort she could have found in the familiar mantra.

She executed a complete circuit around the coliseum behind the young man bearing Sanguis' house colors, pining against the wasted time, stood along other houses and their stable of gladiators, some of whom looked no better than thugs, others worse still. Sanguis had the reputation of offering the grandest spectacles and best-trained fighters.

Her doing. And now he had crossed the line and kept Holly from her duties. Also her doing.

Guilt deepened its hold on her heart, which ached with each breath. Her treatment of the Hadisian and then letting one of her fighters down. Where had her orderly life gone?

Opal turned once to check behind her, caught the Hadisian's gaze on her. Her heart squeezed.

The announcer presented each stable by name and enjoined trainers to leave. Before she did, Opal passed amongst her gladiators, checked and adjusted something on each of them and offered last judicious advice. Makala only grunted and turned his face away when she tightened his breastplate. She wanted to say something to him. Caught between her personal motivations and duty, Opal said nothing.

When she came to Dar, she stopped, reached to a strap on his wide chest but retracted her hand when he twitched and narrowed his eyes down at her. For the beard hiding it, she had not seen his mouth and had to tear her gaze off it. Both a dimple and a cleft chin? She had not expected either. Wondered why she had not. He was a man like any other. Well, maybe not.

"Fight well." She had meant to say something else. Something more.

Just as she had meant to keep Sanguis from using Holly for his personal pleasures. Failed at this too. A novel taste in her mouth—failure. And confusion.

"I'll see you later," he said nonchalantly.

He would not, but she nodded anyway because she feared opening her mouth and betraying herself to this dangerous man, this doomed man.

As a dream with sights and sounds barely reaching her and with time itself suspended in its great design, Opal turned from Dar Skara and walked away. Her heart breaking.

Dar watched her leave, violet eyes rimmed red and looking watery. What the hell was wrong with her? Did she feel guilty for what she'd done to him the night before? She should! That two-faced bitch.

He pumped his chest out, pretended even to himself it didn't matter, that her sad-puppy eyes didn't matter. She'd played her part in the madness and now she was gone to watch the show. What did he care if he could clearly see the turmoil, the guilt in those strange orbs? What the fuck did it matter?

It didn't.

It couldn't.

Because if he cared what she thought, it'd mean she'd gotten some sort of leverage over him, and that just couldn't be tolerated. He didn't mind fucking her, but he sure as hell didn't want her in his mind.



"You pathetic moron," he snarled, glad for the disruption when Thomasz cut him a vicious glare. "You watch those eyeballs, man, if you wanna keep them inside your skull."

But even while he exchanged hatred-charged looks with the pair of asswipes, his thoughts—and pretty much everything else but essential systems—were on Opal Seleria. The enigma. The walking contradiction. The one gal around whom he would've liked hanging out.

"I wish circumstances were different," she'd murmured as he fell into drug-induced sleep. Those eyes hadn't lied—she did wish it.

So had he. The devil knew he did.

That made him even angrier. At her. At the fucking Vespasian assholes. And at himself.

"Now let us see the battle order!"

The presenter's salesman's voice pulled Dar out of his ruminations.

To the crowd's vociferous pleasure, a giant electronic scoreboard hovering over the coliseum blinked to life in a yellow display against slate gray background. Each house and gladiator were represented and grouped according to status. His was the highest, even if he was supposed to die the first day. Maybe they liked the doomed damnati better than the rest of the fighters? Crazy fucks. Not that it would surprise him.

After a cheesy drum roll and some crowd-stoking, the order of the fights was announced, numbers rolling, rolling, then blood-red arrows appearing to link two names. His came up right away with the red laser line linking him to a fighter from house Selona. The weapons would be a short sword. Whatever. He didn't give a shit. He didn't intend to make it last.

After the introductions and the fight order, each house was invited to stand in their respective stalls along the circular wall. Like horses waiting for the slaughter.

As he stood near the entry, Makala kept checking back at the doors through which they'd entered. He looked worried for some reason Dar didn't care to learn. After a while, the man turned to him, nodded. "Good luck."

Dar rolled his shoulders, jumped on the spot a few times. "Fuck off, pretty boy."

"When they say 'a short sword'," Makala went on, nonplussed, "they really mean it."

"Let him find out for himself," Thomasz put in waspishly. "Maybe *Opal* should've given him private lessons."

Dar let a dark smile reply for him.

Thomasz cursed. "And I thought she was a frigid ball-buster. I guess she likes them big and dumb."

Dar put his face close enough to Thomasz's to see the red veins in the guy's eyeballs. The other "brother" clearly itched to get involved. "Adrian, don't make me

come down there. As for you, you backbiting little snake, you couldn't handle half that woman if you were twice the man you are."

A blast of siren like a foghorn drowned Thomasz's reply even if the expression spoke volumes.

"And I don't need no damn luck," Dar said to Makala, who shook his head then returned to watching the doors expectantly.

With the rest of Sanguis' slaves watching, Dar walked to the middle of the arena and visually killed everyone in sight from guards to spectators to annoying hoverbots covering the event. If any of those things buzzed around his head, folks at home would get a great view of the underside of his boot. Annoying little fuckers.

But once he reached the center of the arena, turned toward the VIP and announcer's tribune, something happened to his brain. Must have been something in the water on this stupid planet. Because he sure as shit never felt this way.

He shouldn't be thrilled, fired like never before and a bit—just a bit—proud at the crowd's obvious interest in him. There shouldn't be adrenaline pumping his veins to the bursting point. And he shouldn't wonder if Opal was watching, and let's say she did, if she was cheering for him.

"Motherfucking Vespasians," he growled just to let some steam out.

When his opponent joined him—that was a whole lot of guy and reminded Dar of a Viking in a black racer outfit—Dar let out a few puffs of air in case he started hyperventilating. Because he'd just noticed on the board that this was a Vespasian criminal. For some reason, fighting a crook didn't feel half as bad as another slave who didn't want to be there in the first place. Nan—rest her soul—would argue with that reasoning, but she wasn't there, was she? She'd get an attack of apoplexy if she'd lived to learn what happened to her grandson. She hadn't died well and chances were neither would he. Maybe there was a curse on the Skara family he'd never heard of. Might explain a few things.

When his name was announced, the "Viking" raised both arms, flexed those huge muscles to the crowd's loud delight. Great, a showman.

By contrast, Dar didn't move a muscle when his name filled the speakers. He didn't need to. People in the tribunes went wild. What the fuck was wrong with them?! Had they been paid?

He noticed just then in the compacted sand a few paces in front of the wall below the VIPs a single short sword gleaming in the hammer-hard sun. So that was what Makala had meant. "A" short sword. As in only *one*. They'd have to fight for that too.

Well, those Vespasian cretins had another think coming at them because he didn't intend to play by the rules. They could kiss his hairy ass if they weren't happy either.

Another blast of foghorn and the Viking rushed for the sword. Dar let him have it.

He widened his stance when the large blond whirled around, now armed and grinning, and charged right back at him. Nothing like making an ass of himself.

Dar sidestepped the attack, kicked the Viking in the ass as he went stumbling past. The crowd liked that. And fuck them too.

"I'll chop your arms off," the Viking snarled, whipping long blond hair out of his face. "Then I'll finish you."

"Just come over here and die, would you? Haven't got all fucking day."

Everything happened fast. The Viking charged again, sword coming down in a vicious quick overhead arc that Dar evaded by crowding in against the other guy. He closed a fist on the other's breastplate strap, reeled him in for a good one-two-three slugs to the snout. His knuckles throbbed, but Dar didn't give a shit. Eat or be eaten. Since life was an unfair bitch that had him by the balls, he had to hit hard, hit first and hopefully not die that day.

Too bad, Viking.

Before his opponent realized he was done for, Dar wrapped an arm around his head and bent over. Despite the blood whooshing in his ears, he heard it. The muffled crunch. And felt it against his biceps. The guy didn't even twitch.

If his blood had boiled only a minute before, it ran cold now. Like liquid nitrogen in his veins. Stupid, empty, meaningless fights. Nothing better than coming up with ways to hurt one another. Right then he hated his own species with a passion.

Sun stabbed into his brain when he looked up, way up at the VIPs. He couldn't see Sanguis for the distance but could tell he was looking.

"Here's what I think of your fucked-up fights, Sanguis," Dar snarled low, knowing the hoverbots would relay his words magnified a hundredfold.

When he stepped back and allowed the lifeless form to slump to the sand, a stunned silence greeted him. Even the commenter, who'd relayed every bit of action with cheers and taunts, shut the hell up.

Dar turned his back to the VIP tribunes, marched for the stall assigned to him and stood there, arms crossed. If they wanted entertainment, well, they could ask for a refund.

He'd just killed a man. Not for them. For him. Preservation instincts. Didn't make the thing any fucking less dumb.

Despite his best intentions of ruining the show, the crowd erupted in cheers. Up on the screens, a close-up of Sanguis and his ass-kissing entourage. He was smiling.

Dar's heart sank.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her breaths reverberated against the glass walls and marble floor. Labored breathing of a frantic sprint.

Opal charged through the entrance to the praetor's private quarters but skidded to a halt when the sudden roar of the crowd traversed her belly. Only a death would bring out such passion. A vision intruded into her thoughts.

The Hadisian – Dar – lying in a pool of blood. His.

She gritted her teeth, ripped her helmet off and kept it under her arm as she navigated the glass and steel inner sanctum of Sanguis' home. No guard stopped her. Had they stood there immobile as Sanguis led Holly back to his chambers? Had he even done so? Had they played a role as she had?

The guilt would crush her.

She passed more guards, one of the serving staff. Opal's presence in the building predated most of them and the master as well. She had been born here thirty-seven years prior, born the only Seleria child of that generation, much to her mother's chagrin. Her training had lasted the better part of the first twenty years, and as her mother's role diminished due to her advancing age, hers had grown. She never would have let Sanguis interfere this way. But then again, she had never had to deal with him directly, only with the father, who had and would remain the lone Sanguis of noble character.

Just as she rounded the corner leading to the praetor's bedchamber, Commander Illo was closing the door behind him, loosening his blood-red cape around his neck. He looked pale and angry. When he spotted Opal marching directly for him, he straightened and flipped the corner of his cape over his shoulder in formal salute.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded without stopping for an answer.

She had her hand on the handle when the commander blocked the door with the tip of his boot. "This is the praetor's private chamber."

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew her eyes relayed the anger tightening her chest and fists. The pila creaked when she squeezed her sweaty palm around it. Opal drew herself to her full height, which equaled that of the man before her. He blanched. "Commander, you will move aside or I will do it for you."

"Is it your wish that he punish another servant?" the man demanded. "As he did yesterday? That Hadisian is more trouble than he is worth."

"The Hadisian did not cause that girl's death. Sanguis was always a vile and vindictive man. You know this better than I do. And we both should have done more to protect those under our charge."

He punched the wall. "Opal! Can you not see? For every affront there has to be a price! It will never end! It is better to just do our duty and –"

"And what? Never mind those who depend on us?"

He retreated from the force of her voice. Resignation and something else shone in the blue eyes. Fear.

The distant rumble of the crowd's chanting interrupted her thoughts. Another gladiator she had let down. More than a gladiator... A man with whom she had shared herself in the most intimate way. Physically, emotionally.

She shouldered him aside. "Get out of my way!"

The commander called after her when she wrenched the door wide, stepped into the gloomy interior of Sanguis' bedchambers, which dripped red velvet and gold accents.

He cursed, followed her inside. "She was already dead when I found her!"

Her world vacillated when the man's words hit her. Slowly, since she did not think her legs would ever move at her command again, she turned to face him. He seemed to shrink, shook his head emphatically. He looked older than his late forties, tired and drawn. "She was dead, Opal, I swear."

"Where is she?" How could her voice be so calm?

A quick glance told her all she needed to know.

Both pila and helmet landed on the floor with metallic clangs. She did not care.

Opal followed his line of sight deeper into the chamber, toward a massive bed of ornate, genuine wood beneath the stainless steel load-bearing skeleton and glass walls, a too-large bed in utter disarray, a mess of cushions and sheets on which lay Holly. Opal had no doubt as to what killed her for the thin silver cord still bound the redhead's neck. She had been used violently and left there, spread in a sordid death beneath that of a gladiator. Sanguis had done this then simply...left?

Sheets tore, a small angry sound when Opal ripped them from the bed to cover the woman. Veiled the puffy, darkened face. Covered the ruined flesh.

"Call the healers," Opal said in a tone of voice that surprised her. Gentle. Composed.

Perhaps the calmness of her order stunned Illo into action, but she barely had time to slip her arms under Holly's lifeless body when the commander rushed out of the chambers. She heard his voice down the hall.

In her arms, Holly weighed heavily – perhaps in direct proportion to the remorse – but Opal held on out of sheer stubbornness. She had let her down, but she would carry her this far. At least as far as the healer's stretcher. Moisture gathered then spilled over her eyelids, which stung and burned. A sob she could not suppress hissed out of her. Part anger, part despair.

"Please forgive me," she whispered to the bundle of sheet that covered the woman's head.

She had failed in her duty.

Her heart in her throat, she carried Holly out of the praetor's bedchamber, ignored the stunned guards and their halfhearted attempts at stopping her. One blocked her way, hand on weapon, unsteady gaze shifting from her to his companion before he stepped aside and let Opal pass without challenge.

Illo appeared around a corner, healers in tow, stretcher between two grave-faced assistants. She deposited her former charge on the stretcher and tucked the loose arm

back under the sheet. She thought she said something to the healers. She was not sure. One of them replied. She did not hear. She wanted only one thing...

"Seleria," Illo called as she marched on to the elevators. "He will not tolerate you interrupting the fights! The damnati is already on his second!"

The doors closed on his voice. Opal did not even turn around to ride the elevator up the nine floors to the skybridge and the coliseum's dignitaries section. She stood facing the wall. How appropriate for her situation.

A soft *ping* then the doors opened.

When she turned, both guards standing by the hall gasped and stepped back.

"Unlock the doors," she ordered, not slowing as she reached the mammoth stainless steel affairs. Beyond, the crowd's chanting drowned the man's reply. "Do it. Now."

His companion, an older woman both scarred and decorated, planted her palm on the access panel, which turned green. The weight of the door barely registered when Opal yanked on it and came face-to-face with a wall of cheers and applause. The sound was deafening. She had never seen nor heard the crowd this wild before.

She stood on the topmost step of the dignitaries' tribunes with a splendid view of the praetor and his entourage as they sat on plush cushions strewn about stone ledges.

Perhaps he felt her presence thirty feet behind him. Or someone with a communications link had warned him, but Sanguis turned back, smiled and waved her to him.

"I am surprised to see you here," he called from his seat. "Do you not usually dote on your gladiators between fights?"

So casual. As though nothing had happened. "You killed her," she replied loudly. "You killed Holly."

Several heads turned to stare. Conversations died.

The smile crystallized at the corners of his mouth. He nodded, someone accepting a small slap on the wrist. "Holly. Was that her name?"

"Yes," Opal snapped in reply. "The gladiator you raped and murdered in your own bed was named Holly."

That seemed to draw everyone's attention. The woman closest to Sanguis leaned the other way, eyes wide with fear and disgust. One of the senators—Opal recognized her as one of the few who had publicly opposed Sanguis' reform—sharing the praetor's tribune stood in outrage.

"Is this true?" Senator Assiniboine demanded. Anger seethed behind the lined face, made her brow into wrinkled satin the color of night, created a quasi physical halo of her coiled silver hair. An angry Gorgon.

"Sit," Sanguis enjoined through a tight smile. "They are watching."

Indeed “they” were. Hoverbots had come swarming around the dignitaries to capture their reactions to the fight. After a second or so, they disappeared below the ledge.

The standing senator gathered her robes around her, snapped her chin at her lone close protection agent standing not far behind, who put his hand to his hip, clearly on his concealed weapon even if none were allowed in the tribunes.

Once at the door, Senator Assiniboine turned. “You have committed foul acts in the past, Sanguis, and have ever benefited from the senate’s fear. No more.”

Sanguis’ smile never wavered. “And well fed I shall keep it, Senator.”

“Fear can only feed one’s designs for so long. Then another comes and supplants it. It is sad that such illustrious blood as that of the Sanguis family skipped a generation. You have polluted an event that used to be regarded as the highest physical prowess. You have created this spectacle instead. I withdraw my sponsorship and will enjoin others to do so.”

Sanguis nodded, smiling still. “I beg you – and your lovely daughter – to reconsider this stance, Senator.”

The older woman flinched but nonetheless threw him a murderous glare. A second senator soon joined her then half a dozen left as well amidst mumbled goodbyes or uncomfortable silence. But well over half stayed in their seats. Representative of the sway Sanguis possessed over the senate proper, where fear and backroom dealings primed and where the quality of a person’s character was measured in credits.

In the central tribune beside that of the praetor’s, the visual-only holographic relay of Emperor Galba blinked off. This constituted a true affront. Sanguis would not be able – or allowed – to disregard this. Opal was glad. At least he would answer a few questions from the emperor.

“How dare you challenge my authority?” Sanguis said, rising to his substantial height. The polyurethane ceremonial armor creaked when he stood and planted large, tight fists on his hips. Around the gold armor and blood-red tunic, muscles bulged on his thick shoulders and bull’s neck, even if he never lost his charming smile. Such a handsome, vigorous man harboring such a filthy soul. Opal could not reconcile the two.

“It is your honor and character that I challenge.”

The smile disappeared. “My honor? You would teach me about honor? You? Who are nothing more than a teacher, the daughter of a weak and pathetic fool in a long line of fools? When my family has employed, has *owned* yours for generations?”

Perhaps he thought these personal attacks would sway her or confound the issues. Opal crossed the distance in three powerful strides that caused several of Sanguis’ female friends to scatter like insects from under an upturned rock. Opal drew near enough that by the time she stopped, she stood almost nose to chin with the sneering man. His cologne tickled her nose, smells of incense and spices.

“You may attack my lineage at your leisure, Praetor. It will not lessen your crime.”

"It is not a crime to kill one's own slave," he remarked, licked his lips. Grinning once more, he added in undertones, "Or one's own slave wrangler."

"But compromising the games is. And you have."

"I have brought new fire to the games," he snarled under his breath. "And you should thank me on your elbows and knees. Your 'Holly' did. Or perhaps you wish to finish like those you train."

Cold and clammy, shock squeezed her innards. "What do you mean? Are you challenging—"

"Your beloved gladiators die. It is what they do. At one point, it is what they all do."

She wanted to reply "Not all" but the triumphant glint in his blue eyes stopped her. No...

"Those who have served their three years..." She cleared her throat, fought against the sting in her eyes, the bile bubbling up her chest. She would not give him this sort of satisfaction. "All of them?"

Had someone extinguished the sun, Opal would not have felt any blinder. Colors left, smells and sounds. Nothing remained of her world. Had she died of a heart attack? She could not breathe, could not think, could only feel. Had suddenly become a mere extension of herself. All nerve endings and nothing else. Then on the heels of this terrible shock came devastation.

Everything she had ever believed in...lies? All of them. All of them dead?

"After their loyal services, they have earned their freedom," Sanguis said with surprising warmth. It did not last. "The ultimate freedom."

Jules, Hannah, Bjors, Henneke. So many others. She could name them all. Her gladiators who had fought well and—supposedly—earned their freedom back as had been the way since the beginning of the games. All killed outside the coliseum. Like soldiers who had survived the war but been brutally murdered in their home. The irony stabbed deep.

By the corner of her eye, she spotted a familiar silhouette on the giant screen. The Hadisian.

"What is this?" she murmured, not trusting her voice yet. She had been trained for one life and one duty, both of which now meant nothing. Had the others known? The trainers before her, her mother, her grandmother? Had they all known and said nothing, or had they discovered it as she had?

"See for yourself," Sanguis' voice intruded into her thoughts, raped her mind as he had Holly's body. Opal shivered.

As if she floated above herself, she numbly stepped down stone ledges, each taking her closer to the balcony. Sounds came to her as though through a hood, diffuse, muffled. As she neared the edge, she saw below not two gladiators as she had expected but... How many were there? All from a single house except for one.



"What is the meaning of this?" she breathed. Had he even heard her? "What have you *done*?"

She felt Sanguis behind her. A vile shadow. A stench.

"He dispatched the first much too quickly," Sanguis said as he pressed his chin on the back of her shoulder. She hated his nearness but could only focus on the scene below. "Look at him. Is he not breathtaking?" He sounded aroused.

This many against one.

"You had no right," she began, gritting her teeth. Her heart would surely fail.

"After the part you played?" he replied incredulously. "Never forget you helped put him there."

She had. Good fortune, she had. But not like this... Had never meant for this.

Below, pure carnage.

Dark red sand. Weapons and bits of armor strewn in a wide radius. Gladiators down on the ground, in the various positions in which they had died. Pitiless, a hoverbot filmed at close range a lone figure left standing, captured the image and branded it in Opal's brain.

Dar Skara.

No longer sporting a helmet, he stood empty-handed and bearing numerous wounds, stood in the middle of a massacre undoubtedly of his making. Blood, so much of it, glistening in the sun, dribbling down his face and chest, his legs and arms, obscured the gold of his armor. Like liquid rubies. Torrents of them. Sweat rendered his oiled body a playing field of shadows, as did the man's thick muscles. She had never witnessed such feral and terrible beauty. A vengeful god of war.

The hoverbot closed in on him, circled a few feet above his head as a vulture would, descended at shoulders' level for a straighter angle, a better view, recorded, waited for more.

Opal put her hand to her mouth when Dar looked up at the dignitaries' tribunes. Rage deformed his face. Black eyes glistened ice cold death. Despite the distance, she knew he had seen her. His expression softened.

Then to her horror, his eyes rolled back in his head. Like a great felled tree, Dar collapsed to the ground.

Just as he landed in the sand, as his large body settled and the long black hair whipped down to obscure his face, Opal knew. Perhaps she had always known and refused to acknowledge the irrefutable truth that now filled her. Even the great betrayal and lie her life had been now meant nothing, drifted away like smoke on the wind.

She had fallen for the damnati. And she could not watch him die.

A great hush descended on the crowd. Fifty thousand held their collective breath. A wave of silence, an ocean of stillness. Grains of sand suspended in an hourglass. Wheel of time frozen on its axle. Opal felt as though she alone lived and breathed, waited and watched in terror and wonderment for a sign of movement, even the tiniest, faintest.

There rose a great clamor that could have begun in the bowels of humanity. Swelled outward like a black rot that knew no limits. Engulfed everything else.

They wanted more.

"Listen to them!" Sanguis yelled to be heard. Arousal deepened his voice. She hated him for it. For many other things. "They love him!"

The bloodthirsty crowd was not the only one who did.

## Chapter Six

As soon as Dar took care of the “Viking”, a handful of attendants rushed to the fallen fighter, picked him up as would a squad of ants a piece of leaf, and carried him out of the arena.

Up in the VIP tribunes, he could tell something was happening. In his gold armor and blood-red tunic Sanguis was hard to miss. He stood from his seat, spoke to a waiting guard, who relayed the message into his hand. The man must have held some sort of commslink.

Another fight was announced. Makala stepped forward, murmured a prayer.

“Keep your spit for Sanguis,” Dar muttered.

“Have you ever worried over a loved one, Hadisian?” he snarled. Brown eyes like twin guns stared bullet holes into him. “Have you ever *had* a loved one?”

“Aww, give me a fucking break. You need a tissue?”

“He kept her with him,” Makala went on, voice tight, eyes narrowed through the slits in the helmet. Walking away to join his opponent in the middle of the arena, he threw over his shoulder, “Sanguis kept Holly with him last night after you left with Seleria.”

It shouldn’t have mattered to him one damn bit. Vespasian affairs. Not his problem. Didn’t give a flying rat’s ass. Yet he couldn’t really ignore the shiver that tingled up his spine and clamped clammy and cold fingers against the back of his skull. He pushed his helmet deeper on his head.

Why did it bug him so damn much? Holly had been a loud-mouthed bitch all week, and it was blessedly quiet without her around. But he’d seen the way Sanguis looked at her... And even if he was new around these parts, he could still tell Opal was trying her damndest to keep the praetor off her gladiator. But then again she’d been busy the night before. Stabbing him in the back. Or the heart.

Dar tossed that one around. He’d never been one to shy away from anything, and he sure as hell wouldn’t start avoiding fucking thoughts. So he went there, followed the current of uneasiness to its root. Deep down inside it bugged him that good folks like Makala and Holly would be stuck in the web of vicious tyrants like Sanguis just because they’d been born on a planet that accepted this kind of shit. If something like that were to happen on Hadi, there’d be a riot pretty damn quick! But ugly stuff could and did happen on Vespas. They may be the big bully on the block, but its people suffered for it. They should rebel. The little people at the bottom of the food chain should stand up and fight against those like Sanguis. Why the hell did they get down on their knees and wait to be fucked in the ass with their pants on? Hadisians tended to do that too, but never to

the degree he saw Vespasians do it, putting up with awful shit and violence because they were afraid of a handful of men in fucking dresses. Maybe all they needed was a symbol, something to push them along. Make them see that it was possible to fight the system, to dig heels in and stick it to the establishment. But that was all fine and dandy for those who enjoyed playing political games and being martyrs. He was neither. Plus, did he care about Vespasians? Fuck no. Not one bit.

While the crowd noisily enjoyed the current fight—Makala was working out his demons on the guy facing him—he kept his eyes on Sanguis. Something was up and he couldn't put his finger on it. The guy was still standing, talking—arguing, more like—with a guard Dar recognized, Commander Whathisname. Eeloh? Whatever. Dar watched the commander rush up the stairs and disappear under the awning arcing over the VIP boxes. He sure looked in a hurry.

To his left, the door through which they'd entered opened and out spilled a dozen guards with one of those electrical nets stretched between two. Dar uncrossed his arms. Let them come.

But they weren't there for him. Instead, they rounded up the other fighters from his house, the sneering "brothers" as well, and escorted them outside.

What the hell was going on?

The second Makala dispatched his opponent with a vicious thrust in the belly that all but lifted him off the ground—Dar cringed when blood gushed down the dying man's legs—the doors opened again, and this time, a quartet of guards escorted a panting Makala from the arena. Before the thick panels closed, Makala turned back and threw him a questioning look.

Leaving only Dar behind.

The crowd grew quiet. Expectant. Across the arena, the opposite doors opened wide and out trooped a gang of gladiators from another house. Lucky bastards carried weapons.

Understanding came like a cold, Hadisian winter dawn. Slow but harsh, leaving no room to hide from the merciless light.

"Oh you scumbag," he spat as Sanguis sat back in his fancy seat, the giant screen relaying the man's smile.

He should've made the Viking last.

So this was what it felt like to have nothing to lose. Like a living death. Breathing nothing yet going through the motions anyway, out of muscle memory, because he just...ought to. Blind eyes and deaf ears, yet missing nothing of the scene unfolding in front of him. And in his heart, a tiny but persistent impulse that needled him to stay focused, to stay alive because there was something—someone—at the end of that tunnel. It was crazy. He couldn't understand why he'd feel this way. No logical reason explained it. But in this—chances were his final minutes of life—all he could think about was how much of a bitch it was not to have had his chance with Opal Seleria.

That if they'd met under different circumstances and in another time, another place, he probably would've fought over her. For her.

Dar slowly peeled his shoulder from the wall, advanced toward the thugs Sanguis had dispatched to take care of this stubborn damnati who just wouldn't play by the rules. They fanned in a semicircle, maybe thinking he'd fall for that. Thinking they'd put him out of their misery. What they didn't realize was Dar Skara had nothing left but this fight. Not his beloved Nan—rest her soul—nor the Vespasian woman warrior whom in another life he might have learned to trust and like. Nothing but this spectacle of violence. Like any other Skara, if he was going down, he'd do so with someone else's shirt collar in his fist.

Fuck yeah!

The blast of trumpets didn't even startle him. Neither did the crowd's hushed patience. The other gladiators attacked first. All at once. Dar was waiting.

Sand flew. Then blood. One hadn't held onto his short sword hard enough. Dar took it from him. When the guy's head toppled from his shoulders, great crimson torrents in its wake, Dar kicked the still-standing body back against the others. The sight should've disturbed him. He'd been raised a fighter, not a butcher.

It didn't. Nothing left but this madness. Had to take them down. Had to show Sanguis he hadn't been broken. That even in the end, as the last drop of Skara blood seeped into Vespasian sand, Dar Skara had died when he'd meant to and not a fucking nanosecond before.

Swords clashed. Metal against metal. Such an antiquated sound amidst the booming speakers rendering the action. Grunts of pain. Arcs of scarlet against sky of azure. Armor bending. Blades perforating, slashing, crushing. Something burned in his lower back. He'd been hit. Killed the one who'd snuck around to outflank him. So many of them. Gleaming, fantastical faces of helmets. Dragons, chimeras, wolves, tigers. Roars of the crowd for each hit.

Dar jumped over a low arcing pila and felt the swoosh underneath his soles. Had barely landed when he delivered a bone-crushing, downward strike of his bloodied sword. A fucking sword! Who could've guessed he'd go down with a thing like that in his hand? Strangely, it felt right somehow.

A gladiator betrayed her presence in his right blind spot. Dar was waiting when she took a sneaky shot at the back of his legs. She *humph*-ed and fell back when he kicked out and high, caught her in the chest and sent her spinning on the spot, finished her with a quick and economical thrust mid-body. So soft. Didn't care too much where it landed as long as it finished her. More blood.

Something knocked his helmet from his head. He saw stars for several seconds, roared and spun on himself so they couldn't use his temporary weakness to their advantage. Limbs fell, bodies folded over his blade. Burns flared on his back. His thighs. His own blood joined his adversaries'. Dar laughed. A hyena. A crazy man. He'd never done this. He was dying.

Cursing, taunting, Dar thrust, slashed and broke everything he could reach. Knew he must have been a scary sight, laughing and whirling like a madman. Was she watching? Was she proud? Sad? Embarrassed? Turned-on?

Fuck them all! Let them come!

In a crescendo of frenzied energy, bodies crowded him, bodies separated by metal and armor, by the cheers of the crowd, by sand that stuck to oiled and bloodied skin. When his weapon was ripped from his grasp, he killed some of them with his bare hands. Nothing to lose.

Everything slowed. Not so many clangs of metal against metal. He felt sluggish, dull and tired. So tired. To his shock, to his dazed and befuddled senses—loss of blood, he could recognize the signs—he stood there amidst faint groans and settling dust. As though in the epicenter of a storm now gone away to cause more damage elsewhere, to kill some more. Then after a few seconds—or years—nothing. Alone. Stillness. As though supported by the deafening silence pressing against him on all sides. Keeping him upright. Keeping limbs attached, aching body together. His mind from exploding into tiny shards of him.

He looked up and around. Despite the sweat, the blood, his vision cleared for one instant. A split second of blinding clarity.

Dar saw her. Like a goddess ashamed of her divine vengeance, of her terrible beauty that could blind a man, of the things mortals had done in her name, she looked back at him. Repentant. Chagrined. Regretful. Beautiful in her shock and sadness. Then her expression hardened. Dar wanted to smile. Had he had a shred of energy left in him, he would've snorted a laugh and told whoever had pissed her off to run and not look back. If they hid well and deep maybe the angry goddess wouldn't see them.

Because behind the violet eyes, rage swelled like the mother of all cosmic storms.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You will die for this," Opal said in a soft voice when she meant to roar her outrage and pain. "If not by my hand, then another's. But you *will* die for this."

Sanguis put his mouth by her ear to be heard above the din. "We are all mortal, Opal. No one is above this great equalizer, not you, not me and not any of the gladiators. But should you have any idea about my own mortality, your Hadisian would fall seconds after I did."

Her Hadisian. The man had never spoken sincerer words. Truth sounded so strange on his lips.

Another sort of truth slowly surfaced. Despite Sanguis' betrayal, the cage of lies he had built around his family and house—hers included—and the indignity he had left in his bloody wake, she could not act on her rage. Not right now. He had destroyed the things in which she believed. Destroyed them and caused her to doubt the rest. She

hated him with all her being. For his lies and for making a parody of her beliefs. Opal felt stupid, wounded, like a buffoon on display. All these years.

But acting on her rage would be selfish, ill-timed. And if one shred of truth still remained in her life it was this...she was patient.

Plus, right now, she needed to help Dar more than she yearned to punish Sanguis. But the rage would not go away entirely. She would keep it, feed it, harvest it. For later.

"Admit it, Seleria, it is all over your face. He electrifies you as much as he does me. Had I known you were capable of such passion, that you were not a frigid, duty-bound she-man, I would have roused your ire a long time ago. You are almost pretty."

"And you, Sanguis, have revealed the depth of your ugliness. I will never again look at you and see a man."

He cocked his head, eyes sparkling. "What fills your mind's eye, Opal?" Sanguis asked, wrapping a large fist around her forearm. He squeezed hard, stopped circulation to the hand with which she gripped the handrail. She would not turn away from Dar Skara. Not for Sanguis. "Do you wish you could rend me limb from limb, carve your rage into my flesh, ruin me body and mind?"

"No." With a deft twist of the wrist, she broke his grip. "Because that is what *you* would do."

A whirring hoverbot interrupted the exchange. He took a step away from her, offered a small nod and a smile to the exultant crowd, which renewed its cheers and vociferous approval, literally shook the coliseum.

Sanguis resumed his seat, his golden armor glistening in the sun and, the color of fresh blood, his tunic stretched over his lap. The woman closest to him sat rod straight, mouth tight, eyes fixed on a faraway spot. Everyone else looked as tense. No one said a word or made a move. She loathed them only slightly less than she did herself.

"I look forward to tasting your revenge, Seleria. Perhaps unlike your mother, you are no fool."

He would make a game of this. A hunt. A battle of willpower and intent. She had never felt so ready for a fight as she did right then. Because unlike other times she had cursed his father's passing, and her own mother's as well, for leaving before she was ready to let go, she had never felt so prepared. Primed. He would pay for the horrors to which he had subjected Holly, for cheating and twisting Opal's devotion into something ugly.

And he would pay for Dar Skara.

She climbed the ledges one after the other, had reached the door when Sanguis' voice stopped her.

"I will let you play the first piece," he said. His voice filled the dignitaries' tribune. "Then I will move mine."

The guards stood at attention, faces betraying nothing. Had hers looked the same while she witnessed something that was clearly wrong? Had she appeared stoical even

if she sometimes lamented that things had gone too far? As she spoke her lines in Sanguis' play, did her expression betray any of the doubt she felt, any of the guilt? Opal grabbed both thick wrought iron handles, wrenched the doors out wide and ripped the hydraulics on one.

The way to the healers felt like a dream. Opal was reaching the white-on-white chamber just as the fight attendants rounded the corner with a hoverlift between them and the large man sprawled on it, facedown with a few strands of hair dangling over the ledge. Blood dripped a path into the room.

A team of healers in their pale gray uniforms took over and, aided with Opal, rolled the unconscious man onto a gurney on which had been set a thin green mat. To soak up the blood.

While they busily tended to him with shots from dermaguns ranging from adrenaline to steroids, and forced a couple of caffeine tablets down his throat, the rest of the wounds were treated with chemical-smelling cleansers. Opal held his thick arms, rendered slick with blood, while a healer quickly sutured the ruined skin with adhesive patches of quick-acting regenerators.

"Will he fight again today?" the head healer on duty asked, an older man whom Opal had seen from time to time. She did not even know his name. Eyes and hands remained on Dar, but she knew everyone's attention had turned to her.

"What is your name, sir?"

"Alius."

"No, Alius," she replied softly. "This man will not fight again today. Or tomorrow."

He nodded. "Very well."

As if another filter had been added to her vision, she noticed details that had escaped her, the small nods or slanted glances, the subtle approval or surprise, or the way the healers slowed their work and seemed to take more care in their ministrations. Had she never taken the time to note these things? Unless they had never been there to begin with. Opal Seleria had been raised a pragmatic. Some were born on Vespas, others on Hadi, and others still on Earth or in space. Poverty, privilege, social status, genetic makeup. Luck of the draw. One had to play the cards given at birth. But all that time she had been the only one it would seem to have played by the rules while everyone else cheated. Or it could be that she had played a different game altogether without realizing she was the only player at the table. Perhaps she should feel foolish. Perhaps it was arrogance that had precipitated this sort of second birth now happening to her.

A monstrous headache squeezed into her skull. She felt disjointed, alien in her own home. Her cage of lies.

Opal slipped her hand into Dar's and stayed standing by his side until the healers left. A pair of vigilant guards stood on either side of the doorway, facing outward.

Alius peeled off the bloody top of his uniform, dumped it into the stainless steel chute by the door. Red stained the cuffs of his white shirt. "Extensive soft tissue injuries,



a broken nose—not the first time in his case—and a quadriceps tear that the regenerators should heal within the night. No need for blood transfusion. He was incredibly lucky. For a damnati.”

The healer left before she could respond. Not that she had anything to add. The list of injuries shamed her. But now was not the time to beat herself over his treatment. She had to get him out of Sanguis’ house. She had to take them all out of the praetor’s reach. Find support with powerful allies. Would Senator Assiniboine help? Perhaps. But only if it suited the cunning older woman. Opal held no expectations that senators would suddenly take up the cause, be moved from their political torpor for the fate of a gladiator or two. Slaves.

She would find a way.

“He forgot to mention my back,” Dar murmured with his eyes closed. The tattoo glistened like wet ink when he grimaced. Someone had slicked his long hair back on his skull. “Someone stabbed me right between the shoulder blades.”

Heat flushed her cheeks. She wrapped her other hand on top of his, unable to tell him what had happened, powerless to share what was in her heart even if she wanted to with all her being. But she had to let go when he weakly tugged it out to let it rest on his belly. The healers had removed the bits of armor left and the white tunic as well, had tucked a pale green sheet down his flanks and thighs. Thick with muscles and now bearing several regenerative patches, his chest rose and fell slowly.

Above their heads, the faint roar of the crowd provided the only sound in the otherwise quiet chamber. After the organized chaos of the healers, the stillness pressed in on her. Opal closed her eyes.

“If you’re here to apologize...don’t.” His voice was at once balm and blade. “I don’t want it.”

She nodded because it had been the first thing on her mind, to apologize, to beg forgiveness the way she had from the lifeless Holly in her arms. Hours or years ago?

He grunted. The sound of metal against metal flared her eyes wide. He was standing, unsteadily, but on his two feet nonetheless, the sheet slipping on the ground to reveal his naked body, a sight that made her belly cramp and her heart ache. Good fortune...he was hard.

The gurney tapped against the wall when he leaned on it, ran a hand back over his hair, which made the deltoid and biceps bulge.

“You should not—”

“Or what?” he cut in, eyes blazing. “I’ll hurt myself?”

“Hurt yourself worse, yes.”

“Worse than what? Huh?! After I had my chest slashed open, my pride and my dignity trampled, had my fucking balls ripped out? You don’t want me to ‘hurt’ myself worse when you all but gutted me already? For what? So you could have a little fun, huh? Turn up the fire under the poor sucker dangling over the spit, see if he squirms?”

"Things used to be different, Dar Skara from Hadi. We Vespasians were once a noble people who built everything you see here. Built a society of privilege and comforts, fashioned it after prosperous times of ancient Earth. Somewhere..." Opal shook her head. She averted her gaze so he would not peer inside her soul. See the unrequited love. And the shame.

"Somewhere along the line, jerks like Sanguis happened," Dar finished for her. Different words than she would have used but the sentiment remained the same.

The tenor quality of his voice, subdued with pain and medications, still resonated inside the healers' chamber, inside her heart as well for she agreed wholeheartedly with his assessment. Somewhere along the line, Vespasians had veered off the path and ventured into a dark maze of rationalization and excuses, of artificial social strata and injustices. How did one reconcile the wrongs of one's own people, the inequities, the crimes such as those Sanguis had committed? No law would. No law even existed to redress such grievances. Off-world-born slaves were considered non-humans and therefore did not fall under Vespasian laws protecting its citizens. But then again, with the senate practically eating out of Sanguis' hand, no court would touch her claim. The emperor may have removed his support by leaving, but Opal doubted he would take on the senate over the fate of a couple of gladiators.

What could she do? What could anyone do? Apologize for having been born Vespasian and part of the oppressors and move on? Contrived at best. She had so believed in this system. Still considered the foundations sound. But what had been built afterward, the sort of deeds and mentality spawned from Vespasian culture and laws... This was wrong. This she could and would fight. By the corner of her eye, she saw one of the guards walking away then his colleague as well, scowling and reaching for his commlink.

She fixed her gaze back on Dar's. "Sanguis exists, even prospers, because he is allowed. Because those like me who believed in the destination shut our eyes to the signposts telling us we were heading in the wrong direction. They say there is no blindness like he who does not wish to see. The root of it all. And for this, I apologize."

"I said I don't want it," he repeated, although not as gruffly as he had the first time.

He leaned and reached for the sheet on the white tiled floor—specks of blood made her eyes water—but Opal hurriedly retrieved it for him, wrapping it around his waist, crossing the corners and handing them back to him so he could tie them. His nearness, his warmth touched her like the purest silk, glided over her skin. She swallowed hard, retreated by a step, would have taken another had he not gripped her by the upper arm and kept her put.

"I'm getting out of here," he growled close to her face. The tattoo wrinkled, the eyes narrowed and muscles twitched along his wide jaw. "You either stay out of my way, or I swear on Nan's memory..." He spat a curse. "You stay out of my way. Clear?"

"You would not kill me. I do not believe you are capable of it."

"No," he said after a long silence. "But I'm not above tying your ass to a chair and hightailing it out of this madhouse. I'm not about to hand my balls over to your boss. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever."

The intensity of his presence nearly overwhelmed her. He filled all her senses. The sight of him, aroused as soon as he woke, the anger brewing underneath the handsome but intimidating surface and the thinning of his luscious mouth to a line. Smells of the healers' work, though strong, could not mask the male musk and remnants of sweat that tickled her nostrils and made her mouth water. His breathing, harsh and shallow, filled her ears and reminded her of the last time she heard him breathe this close to her. The feel of his hand around her arm, the strength, the uncompromising intensity that reduced her skin to mere nerve endings that tingled for him. The only sense he had not invaded was taste, yet her memory filled this lacuna to perfection—salty like tears and honey-sweet, sharp as a spice yet the lightest wine.

Her voice had gone. Only breath remained, quick and superficial. "Sanguis will not touch you now," she whispered. "The emperor removed his support."

"Why are you telling me all this?" he demanded through his teeth.

"So you understand the circumstances, the reasoning. We are not the evil you think we are. Some of us —"

"Keep it for the big guy," he countered with a quick look upward. "And why should that count for anything anyway? What do you care what I think of this whole outfit—or of you for that matter?"

Words like lashes. Her flinch must have surprised him because he narrowed his eyes, studied her while she stood as still as she could. The air between them felt charged with electricity. Opal could almost feel it, crackling, humming with growing intensity. The connection.

"I do care."

"Why?" he demanded.

What could she tell him? That she had developed a weak spot for him, that she would beg for his forgiveness even if she would never plead to save her own life?

"I..."

His nostrils flared as he waited. She did not flinch when he abruptly forced her up against him with an arm around her lower back. "Why?"

Never had she heard a man sound at once demanding and pleading.

She whispered "I...I am sorry."

For a moment hope had glimmered in the black orbs. It died. In its place were regret, anger and frustration. He interrupted her gasp of shock when he crushed his mouth to hers. He kept his eyes wide open.

The angry kiss triggered a muscle reaction from her. She meant to grip his wrist but could not dislodge his hand from her lower back. He bent her backward like a bow. His mouth devastating, pitiless. The kiss of a wounded lover. With his other hand he

clutched one side of her butt hard enough to move her up against him. His erection was crushed between them. He rocked his hips once hard, as if to drive a point home. Abandoning her butt, he gripped her jaw and forced her chin up so he could run his mouth along her throat. His thumb and middle finger dug under her ears. She welcomed the pressure. Even the pain. Better this than the awful emptiness numbing her.

"Is that all I'm good for to you, huh?" he growled, bit her jaw. "A fuck buddy? A slave you can come and tease once in a while?"

"I never — *ah*."

He raked his bottom teeth up her throat, nipped her chin, claimed her mouth again. Stitching ripped in dry, tiny *clicks* when he dug four fingers into the collar of her armor and tunic and yanked sideways to make room for his mouth. He created a V almost deep enough to reach her nipple. To her shame, she lamented he had not denuded it to his brutal mouth. Snarling deep in his throat, he remedied the situation by jerking on her collar again. This time, he seemed to achieve what he set out to do. He cupped her breast thought the armor and tunic, elevated it and wrapped burning-hot lips on the hard point. Opal's mouth opened in a perfect O but no sound came out.

"Tell me you want it, Opal," he snarled. "Tell me you want me or I swear... I'll never touch you again. I'm sick of this shit. Sick of the mind-screw."

With her free hand, she fisted his hair and pulled him down to her chest. She had always believed actions spoke louder than words.

He seemed desperate to cover as much of her skin as possible, in as little time as he could. With the angle, they leaned precariously against the corner of the gurney, which slid along the wall and threatened to spill them to the floor. Dar braced them with his free hand. She felt bereft without his fingers holding her chin up high.

"Kiss me," she murmured over and over. *Make me yours. I am yours.* She could not bring herself to reveal the rest. Her silent plea. Her mute need.

Pinned between the gurney and Dar, Opal let go of his hair so she could lean back on her hands, accentuated the curve of her spine. Her back burned.

Dar's eyes were still open, if narrowed menacingly. Uncompromising fingers curled into her collar, forced her tunic under a breast. Another set of stitches gave. The armor creaked in protest. Ham-pink, his tongue curled out and lashed her nipple. Opal gritted her teeth. Loudly, he sucked at her breast. The vigor curled her toes in her boots. Need tightened her sex. She wanted him. This way. Angry, disheveled, imposing. Desperate as well. It was all there. His own need that seemed to burn as hard as hers.

A thick thigh pressed between hers. She made room as much as she could. The sheet proved just teasing enough to let her feel the heat of his cock crushed against her belly, but not thin enough to feel him properly. She spared a hand to tug on it.

"You leave that alone," he snapped.

"I want you."

Need darkened his gaze. "You're gonna have to do a helluva lot better than that. I'm done fucking around with you. Either you want this..." He gave a potent jab of his hips. Lust flared like a supernova. "Or you don't."

"I want it." Her voice sounded distant and strange. Dreamlike.

He pretended to dive for her throat with his teeth bared. But he did not bite her. Only his breath touched the skin and created shivers to race down her arms. She gasped as she waited, shaking but forcing herself to remain still.

"If you want it, you're gonna have to start showing it. 'Cause so far, I'm not seeing it."

"I do want it." Opal reached up to touch his face but he glowered.

He kept her pinned with his hips as he squeezed a hand between their bodies. Even through the supple armor, when he pressed his hand along her natural curve, she felt the thrilling pressure there.

Dar kept staring into her eyes. Unblinkingly. Allowing no escape and no leeway. She could look at nothing else than those orbs like chips of black ice.

"Please believe me," she murmured. She put everything in her gaze. He had to know. "I *do* want it."

He opened his mouth but a commotion erupted outside the chamber. Shots were fired. Voices raised in pain. Dar cursed as he pushed off her. Opal only had time to yank her tunic and armor back when Thomasz, Adrian and Makala came skidding inside the chamber, weapons obviously stolen from the guards in their bloody hands. The last had a commslink clipped to his collar.

"You're coming with us," Thomasz snarled as he checked back out the doorway. "Hurry!"

Opal threw her hands up. "What are you doing? You will never make it out of the coliseum!"

"Christ," Dar spat, tugging the knotted sheet higher on his waist. Perhaps to hide his predicament. "I'm not going anywhere with you morons."

Adrian leveled his gun. "We don't need him." The hiss of the kinetic energy weapon being charged sliced the air.

Opal's first reaction surprised her. She stepped in front of the Hadisian.

Makala also pointed his weapon at her. It shone like a dormant silver snake. Gone was the playful and cocky young man. "With you, we will. But first, we're getting Holly back."

Her heart sank.

## Chapter Seven

Dar never took meds. They made him cranky. Dulled his senses—except whenever Opal came strutting around in the man-killer outfit. Plus, meds were for sissies.

But when Thomasz pointed his kinetic gun at him, intent plain on his face—obviously, he didn't give a shit about the bargaining powers of a *live* hostage—Dar's mind cleared pretty fucking quick. And Opal stepping in front as a shield—now this, he didn't like one damn bit. Got his man-pride all ruffled. On top of making him lose his hard-on. Plus, it made a knot of his gut. Fear and he weren't on a first-name basis, but he could still recognize the signs.

That fucker was just dumb enough to shoot. So Dar couldn't think of a better thing to say than what came out of his mouth. "You stay the fuck away, you little shit."

Damn meds. Damn hormones.

They'd been so close to sharing something. More than quick and dirty sex. He could see it in her violet eyes. She'd been about to drop her guard. Fucking cretins had messed everything up. Shit, just getting pissed hurt. His entire body rang with grief. He ached in places he hadn't known were plugged in with the rest of his pain sensors. Waking with Opal's hands clutching his arm hadn't been the worst thing...getting hard was. Couldn't keep it in his pants whenever she was around. But the trio of morons standing in the doorway had quickly killed the mood. *And* his plans for a sneaky escape. The more folks tagging along, the worse his chances of making it to the spaceports. Fuck.

"We don't have time for this," Makala said with a little bounce that reminded Dar this guy was no killer or hostage-taker. He might fight well—that pila-stick thing in the guy's hands was dangerous—but he didn't rank first on the To Be Killed list. The nasty little shit Thomasz did. Dar would have to take care of that one before anything else.

"We don't need her," Dar said, taking a step toward the door. He'd take Makala's gun, use him as a shield then get rid of the other two. "But if you guys would stop comparing dicks long enough to—"

Thomasz put his free hand up. "Stay." Then pointing to Opal, he added, "You, come with us. Now."

"Come where?" Opal demanded as she took a step toward the three men. "There is nowhere to go."

As strong and skilled as she was, she'd obviously never dealt with the kind of men Thomasz and Adrian were. Not when they had the power. And the guns.

"We're getting Holly first," Makala snarled with a push at the closer brother. "She's going to take us there." He snapped his chin at Opal, crossed the distance and reached out to grab her wrist.

In a fluid move, she deflected his hand, mirrored his grab. He winced when she reversed her wrist and twisted his in the process. "This is not the answer."

"No, you're right," Adrian put in from the doorway.

Dar only had time to cringe. His world stopped moving. Someone had pushed the Pause button. "No—"

Adrian aimed the silvery gun at Opal. Fired.

The kinetic energy discharge clacked loudly. The bluish flash created a blind spot in Dar's vision.

Both Makala and Thomasz yelled "*No!*" but with different expressions. The first registered horror while the second betrayed frustration.

Opal took the hit in the right shoulder a split second before a small scuff appeared on the far wall. The shot had pierced her, hit the wall. She stumbled back a step, leaned against the gurney for support. "This..." she hissed, sucked a breath. "This will help nothing."

Dar swore his heart had just stopped. He lunged to get the gun from Thomasz, the closest asshole who was about to get his balls handed to him, but a panicky-looking Makala hurriedly pointed his at Opal. With two muzzles, one of which was shaking badly, aimed at her head and one at his, Dar figured the odds weren't good he'd save either one.

"You," he growled at Adrian. "There's one with your name on it." He reached for Opal and steadied her with a fist around the bottom edge of her breastplate. Heavily, she leaned against him.

Nan—rest her soul—she'd know what to do. She'd dealt with worse injuries, hadn't she? All kinds. No choice with the Skara brood getting into trouble left, right and sideways. But he didn't. He was no healer! All he could do was make Opal stay physically upright and through the force of his will keep her conscious.

"You're gonna be all right," he murmured. Had to believe in that. She would. She was strong, body and mind, the toughest woman he knew. She'd be all right.

She looked at him, all violet eyes, which had turned darker. Pain did that to people. "Senator Assiniboine," she whispered, swallowed hard. "Find her. Across the river, the building... L-Like a needle. Blue glass. Her home. She may help." After a mirthless laugh that seemed to burn the last shred of strength from her, she added, "Then again...she *is* Vespasian."

The sudden and crazy thought she could die in his arms flashed in his mind's eye like vivid footage of a train wreck from which he couldn't look away. She couldn't die...not like this. He couldn't even process the thought without his legs turning to jelly and his mind into a horror movie—Adrian died a lot and often and messily.

Dar tried to be gentle, but fear made him gruff. Gruffer. "Show me."

He spun her a quarter turn before she or anyone else could stop him. She grimaced, let out a tight curse. Fuck. She'd been lucky. The energy shot had pierced right out her back and all but cauterized the wound. But what if she was bleeding inside? She'd need a healer. Soon.

"I guess now we need him too," Thomasz said as he turned to Adrian and rammed the butt of his silvery gun in the other's belly. "Idiot."

Adrian took the hit with a grimace. But delight still flashed in the dark little eyes. Dar would pay good money to gouge them out and shove them down his throat.

Makala cursed. Clearly, this wasn't his idea of a good day. "Where is she? Tell me where she is."

Opal shook her head slowly. On her beautiful face, frustration and pain gave way to sadness. Her shoulders tightened, Dar felt the twitch along his arm. "She is gone, Makala," she murmured. "Sanguis... She is gone. The emperor knows. He was there when I confronted the praetor. Everyone knows what he did. He will pay for his crime."

Makala said something Dar didn't get. He'd spoken so softly the distant roar of the crowd drowned his words, but nothing could mask the grief on his face. Nor the pain. He turned away, took position out in the corridor while Thomasz indicated Opal and Dar should follow as well.

The deep vibrato of bass and drums traversed his chest. Something was going on outside. Opal looked up. "The anthem. The day's events are over."

"We'll use the shuttles taking off to slip out. Hurry," snarled Adrian, running to the corner. "Out through the galley."

Must have a service entrance, he thought. "Where's the rest of the fighters?" Dar asked.

"In their pods," Thomasz replied, gave Opal a charged look Dar didn't like. "I'm getting a piece of that later on when we don't need her. You can have what's left."

Rage descended in a red veil over Dar's eyes. "Not if your spine's snapped in two you won't."

"Just move," Makala snapped as he pushed Thomasz forward. Behind them, Adrian brought up the rear, gun swinging left and right. They'd done this before, him and his equally ugly "brother".

Dar kept his eyes on Opal even as he absorbed all three men's movements. One of them was bound to fuck up. He wanted to be ready. He'd throw Opal to the ground – she wasn't that far off anyway...she was hanging against his arm – then get his hand on a gun, give the morons a piece of Skara justice –

"There!" A quartet of guards rounded the corner, guns leveled. Behind them stood the commander who'd come to Hadi. "Stop them!" he yelled.

"Fuck!"



That'd been Adrian. A second later he discharged his gun in a long volley of kinetic energy shots that temporarily blinded Dar as he slipped his arm under Opal's, grabbed the opposite edge of her breastplate and yanked her to him. Half dragging the tall woman, he ran along the corridor's wall, close to it so they wouldn't make such fine targets, and stayed near Thomasz. As much of an asshole as he was, he seemed to know how to stay alive.

"The one who brings her back safely will be shown clemency!" The commander's voice followed them into the galley.

Thomasz nimbly jumped around and over tables and chairs in his haste to reach the opposite door. Adrian and Makala provided cover fire while Dar rushed by, Opal now barely moving her feet along and growing heavier by the second. Christ, she needed a healer!

"She won't last long!" he snarled at Thomasz when they reached the door, shouldering it aside. "Hey! Asshole! She needs a healer!"

Beyond, an industrial kitchen filled with stainless steel implements, heaters and countertops all gleaming under pitiless fluorescents, stretched for a good fifty feet. Staff turned to watch the sudden intrusion.

His companion opened fire on the closest, a trio of young men working at a counter, bent over an array of clear plates, catching one in the back as he turned with a large stainless steel tray of food that went flying high in a multicolored rain. Copper pots and pans clattered when he fell below the counter. His colleagues yelped, diving for cover behind their workstation while the rest of room exploded in yells and a mad dash for the other doors.

"Fuck!" Dar couldn't stop to see if the kid was dead—probably. "They're slaves, just like you. You didn't need to do that."

A vicious grin pulling his mouth wide, Thomasz reached the back door, a metal affair twice as wide as Dar and two feet taller at least. Locked with a combination bar wedged at forty-five-degree angle. That one would be a bitch to go through.

"Get one of the slaves to open it!" he told Dar. "Hurry!"

Dar eyed the door and its casing. A polymer kick plate. Concrete jamb and floor. More show than substance. Two-hundred and forty-five pounds should be a perfect key. Brainiacs never understood the drawbacks of using concrete around moving metal pieces. Unless they'd been poured together, the two didn't mix well or make for a tough combination. Hadi didn't use concrete at all given its harsh climate.

"We need to weaken the seal. Give me the gun," he said, reaching for Thomasz, who backed a step and scowled.

"Tell me what you need."

It'd been worth a try.

"There, around the door, you see the vein of mortar?" Dar ran his index finger down the jamb. "Put a couple of shots every foot or so. Around the hinges too."

Carefully, he laid Opal on the floor, propped up against a workstation. Her head lolled onto her chest. She looked so pale, so vulnerable. He hated seeing her this way. He channeled hatred into his eyes when he stood and faced Thomasz. "They'll have to scrape the walls when I'm done with you."

Makala and Adrian reached the first door, whirled around and closed it. "Hurry," Makala said. His gaze lowered to Opal on the floor. A deep scowl appeared over the dark brow. He looked halfway sad. Maybe that was something Dar could use. Drive a wedge in their little gang.

Feet wide, Thomasz leveled the gun and put more than a couple of shots into the seal, as Dar had asked. Blue flares illuminated the smallish man's face and his shaven skull, but no matter if he stood directly above the muzzle flashes, no light appeared in his dark eyes. Crazy motherfucker.

"Okay, okay! Christ!" Dar yelled. Nothing like killing a fly with a sledgehammer. Asshole. Wasted ammo on his stupid testosterone party. Dust and the faint smell of kinetic shots—a mix of burnt something and ammonia—filled the air. Dar coughed, cursed.

While he kept his eye on the barely conscious woman, he took a few steps away from the door. No two ways about it. Sometimes the most direct route was the best. He was done pussyfooting around.

Thomasz backpedaled, gun aimed at the ceiling. "What are you —"

Jaws locked, Dar charged.

Violent impact, door rattling inside its concrete casing. Cement dust falling on him. Dar grunted under the violence. When his shoulder hit the door, the impact traveled down his arm to numb his hand, along his spine and legs, right to the soles of his feet. Pain jackhammered up his back and flared out of his injuries, but he backed away, rolled his shoulders.

Charged again.

A thunderous crash and the dry clack of something coming apart.

This time, even though the door didn't seem to register the hit, the casing disintegrated into crumbs of mortar and concrete that loosened the metal pins enough that Dar was able to pry them out of the doorjamb. With a deafening clang, the door clattered on the paved ground of a loading bay. Fuck, he must have been running on adrenaline alone because he sure as shit couldn't feel his body anymore.

"Goddammit," he growled as he rolled his shoulders. Something felt out of place. Crunchy.

Sunlight like blades stabbed into his eyes. Cacophony of city sounds, horns, shuttles flying overhead, announcements on giant airships plastered with 3-D ads that urged one to invest in some company about which he'd never heard, encouraged prospective home buyers to *Taste the Sunshine – Move To New Caracas Station*. Dar blinked, shook his head as he tried to adjust to the sudden barrage of stimuli that was Vespas' largest city. No wonder they were all nuts.

They stood at least two hundred feet in the air on the loading docks of a tiered concrete terrace lined with landing pads and bearing large yellow numbers for weight limits. No cargo shuttle. Not even a fucking airbike. No means of escape off the rooftop except for emergency hoverplates that looked as old as he was. No way was he standing on a six-foot-wide exterior elevator—with no walls—and going ten levels down. Not with Opal barely upright.

Some fucking plan.

“You got a shuttle stashed somewhere, genius?” he roared above the drone of neighboring landing pads a hundred or so feet across the divide. The pads were crowded with folks leaving the coliseum in various-sized crafts, taking off amidst a riot of high-pitched whirs that drowned any attempt at normal conversation.

Thomasz said something as he rushed outside, turned and motioned for everyone to follow him while he provided cover. Adrian stepped out next, and Makala with Opal slung around his thick shoulders. The man relinquished her to Dar when he blocked the way and gripped her breastplate. Who did the fucker think he was, putting his hands on her? As soon as Dar touched it, the armor felt different. Sticky. He gritted his teeth when he realized crimson stained his fingers up to the knuckles.

“Thomasz,” he yelled without turning around. “She needs to see a healer! She won’t be much good to your little coup if she dies!”

And she needed to see a healer so he wouldn’t lose his mind in a murderous rampage.

As if things weren’t turning to shit quickly enough already, Opal started to shiver against him, each frisson a blade of worry and fear into his chest. Stabbing. Relentless. “You’re gonna be all right,” he murmured in her ear, hoped she’d heard him. He hoisted her up higher against his side. “I got you, okay?”

She nodded feebly.

He was about to give Thomasz a piece of his mind when a small eruption on Adrian’s upper arm made him whirl around. Blood dribbled from his sleeve as he raised his gun high and started shooting. Dar twisted his neck to see what the hell was going on now.

A couple of guards with long-range rifles were up on the roof behind them. Shit.

Dar spotted the thin silver barrels sticking out over the ledge. Muzzle flashes in bright blue. Polka dots like little suns behind his eyelids. All three gladiators riposted with shots of their own.

Cursing, Dar plastered his back against the wall, kept Opal wedged between it and his shoulder as he gauged the chances of his coming out of this cluster fuck alive—

Thunder ripped the eerie silence of the gunfight. Out of the blue sky descended the gray belly of a large shuttle. It practically landed on their heads as it rotated half a turn, pointed its prow at the ledge and...

*Opened fire?*

Mortar, pieces of stonework and bricks fell in a deluge as the shuttle ripped that part of the building apart. The rhythmic *thud-thud-thud* of the pulse cannon drowned whatever Thomasz yelled, but one thing was clear, those guards wouldn't be bothering them anymore. God, the heat! Vortices of dust and heat distorted Dar's view of the loading docks. His skin was about to fucking cook!

When it had peppered Sanguis' men to the pilot's satisfaction, the shuttle backed all the way to the edge of the docks, its aft hanging out over the void, its prow aimed at them. He knew he couldn't do shit about a pulse cannon, but he still crammed Opal's body behind his as much as he could.

A hatch on the shuttle's side hissed upward and out rushed a couple of men dressed almost like Sanguis' guards but in a deep shade of blue. They waved frantically with the muzzles of their guns.

"Who the hell is that?" Dar demanded.

Makala checked the gauge on his gun, grimaced. "One of the senators' personal guard. Assiniboine. I have no idea what's going on!"

Dar did.

For the first time since he'd woken on this mad world, he knew what was going on. Someone had found their balls and wasn't going to be fucked in the ass anymore. Whoever that senator woman was, Opal said she might help. Apparently she had.

"You know Opal had nothing to do with your gal dying," Dar said in a harsh whisper close to the other's ear.

Makala froze. Gun outward at the shuttle. Adrian and Thomasz crouched nearby, arguing.

"You know if they have a chance those two will stab you in the back."

The brown eyes thinned to menacing slits.

Dar went for the killing blow. "And you know Opal was the only one to stand up to that pig Sanguis."

An interminable moment passed. Then almost imperceptibly except to Dar because he was staring straight at the man, Makala nodded. Once.

Despite his heart squeezing in remorse and something else he'd rather not think about, Dar let Opal slide down the wall to crumple in a heap, white-blond braid falling loose over her chest.

Why had he just put his trust—Opal's life and his own—in Makala's character? He had not a clue. Except that somehow, somewhere, the both of them had more in common than with the two assholes about to meet their maker.

Makala's gun swung at three o'clock, aimed dead center at Thomasz's back. Dar had already crossed the distance, aiming for Adrian, when Makala fired. The energy shot hit the polyurethane armor, created an arc. The guy fell on his face without turning around, without even making a sound, the middle of his back a mess of red pulp that

indicated the shot hadn't come out the other side and instead made jelly of everything inside.

It all happened fast.

Still crouching by Thomasz's side, Adrian lurched back. Not quick enough.

Dar's foot connected with the guy's chin hard enough to snap his head back. He dropped the gun, which skittered a couple of feet away. If Makala decided to switch sides—or just go with his own and damn everybody else—Dar could do nothing but curse. But at least he'd landed a good one into the asshole who'd shot Opal.

"You motherfucker," Dar snarled as he delivered another kick, this one to the man's chest, which projected him a good five feet back. "I told you there'd be one with your name on it!"

Adrian rolled to his knees, snapped up to a fighting crouch. Dar didn't wait until the other found his balance again and instead charged him, shoulder right in the solar plexus, arm wrapped around the man's middle and legs pumping like mad. Because of the weight difference, he pushed Adrian back despite some pretty vicious footwork that tore grunts of pain from Dar, forced the bastard to the edge of the landing docks. Below, two hundred feet of air and the rest of the Roman-style compound stretched left and right. Had a great view of the arena from up here. People still filed out of the tribunes, left a mess behind them. Music played, something operatic.

"Wait!" Adrian yelled, grabbed at Dar's shoulder to steady himself.

Still locked in a grapple, they struggled, with Adrian's feet occasionally lifting off the concrete. Dar cocked his fist back, delivered a devastating upward hook to the body. With any luck, he'd just bruised the guy's liver. A *humph* of air preceded Adrian's knee coming up to knock Dar in the groin. Christ. He straightened, fist on the other's shoulder pad. Received another knee in the balls for his trouble. His snarled curse made Adrian grin. Blood filled the gap between each tooth.

Crazy fuck. A crazy, murderous fuck who'd dared—dared!—shoot at Opal.

A red haze dropped over his eyes. Uppercuts to Adrian's chin, one, two, three. Each impact knocking the man back an inch. Closer to the edge. Wind slapped Dar's hair in his face. He didn't care. The scumbag was going down. All the way down. Grabbing the armor by the back of the breastplate, he forced the man to bend over, rammed his knee twice in the hated gut, received a well-placed punch to the belly for it.

"Hadiesian!" Dar heard behind him. "Hurry!"

Personally, he would've made the fucker hurt long and hard. Lucky for the little shit, Dar had other things on his mind. Such as Opal bleeding to death.

He straightened Adrian by holding his shoulder pads at arm's length. Snapped his head down, head-butted the smaller man in the face, which must have broken his nose because the crunch against Dar's forehead wasn't his bones. As a drunkard would, Adrian stumbled sideways, eyes watery and crossing. Dar steadied him with a fist over the armor strap linking the shoulder pad to the breastplate, cocked his fist back.

No need.

With his eyes rolling in the back of his head and blood glistening on his busted bottom lip, Adrian fell backward. Slowly, horror and realization spread on his ugly mug. He knew he was falling off the landing docks. Yelled something. Clawed at thin air. Dar didn't care one fucking bit. Would've even watched the man land had he had time. He didn't. He turned on his heels, tightened the knotted sheet around his waist as he ran back to where he'd left Opal. She wasn't there anymore. Panic squeezed his heart.

Fuck. That backstabbing—

"Hadiesian!" Makala called again from the shuttle's hatch. It still stood wide up.

Rest Nan's soul.

Dar ran to it, barely acknowledged the man as he leaned over, leaping onto the shuttle's metallic deck, eyes already scanning for her. Where had they put her? If they so much as touched a single blonde hair on her head...

"Opal." Dear God.

The name had never tasted so sweet. It meant something that he'd feel all warm and fuzzy just saying a woman's name. He knew what it meant too, but would have to scratch at that scab later when he didn't have Sanguis' men crawling up his legs.

The sight of her frailty froze his blood.

In the first passenger seat of a row, a five-point harness strapped over her, Opal sat with her head gently rocking left and right due to the shuttle's vibration. Her breastplate and shoulder pads lay on the deck, straps summarily cut. A wide slit in her tunic exposed her muscled shoulder and most of her right breast and also revealed the extent of her injury. Blue and purple skin surrounded a puckered burn the size of a pea. Good thing the shot had pierced her—through some divine intervention he couldn't explain—cauterizing flesh and tissue on its way out, otherwise she would've bled to death in a matter of seconds. Like Thomasz. Not that she was out of trouble yet, despite the saving grace of the cauterization effect. She'd still bled quite a bit. Enough to scare him. It was still all over his fingers. Her bright red blood.

One of the guards standing by the hatch, a smallish woman with short black hair, brought a commslink to her mouth and said something. He hadn't taken a step when behind him the hatch hissed closed. From deep and measured, the vibrations rose, accelerated, became a whirl.

He rushed to Opal, took the adjacent seat and strapped himself in tight. Someone had stuck a couple of regenerator patches along her arms and around her throat. On any portion of exposed skin so the meds could do its work. For some idiotic reason, he pulled the tunic higher over her breast to cover it. She wouldn't want to be seen this way. Undignified.

Across from him, Makala sat as well and buckled the harness over his chest. He nodded. A silent acknowledgement of what they'd done together. Maybe a new teammate. Maybe someone Dar could learn to trust.

Dar returned the man's nod, glad he still had a woman to fuss over, even if it made an ass out of him. An ass with a crush on the wrangler holding his leash. Talk about fucked up.

## Chapter Eight

A brilliant sun shone like a gold disk suspended in a sky of deep indigo. Comfortable heat touched her naked skin. She floated upright above a wide expanse of still water. Gold sun, blue sky, jade-green water. Where was she?

Her hair hung loose around her face, stirred in a balmy breeze, tickled her shoulders. She had not worn it loose in years and was surprised it reached so low down her back. Perhaps she should cut it. Deny the woman, accommodate the fighter. As always.

A presence alerted her senses. Without physical motion that she could detect, she faced backward to find a giant of a man towering over her. Likewise natant as if the very air supported him, naked, magnificent in his intensity and force. With an arm outstretched, he invited her to him. She acquiesced. She knew him. The scent of him, his long black hair obscuring his face, the wide chest and muscled thighs. A modern-day Goliath. Her gladiator. On a long sigh, she rested her forehead against his breast, knew she could do this, she could shed the mantle for a while and trust her tired body to his physical strength and her weary soul to his noble nature. Solace.

"Where have I erred?" she whispered into his skin. Tanned and so warm under her fingers. She traced the nipple, watched it contract. Kissed it. "Who else have I misjudged?"

Hot, his hand followed her spine from sacrum to atlas. He did not answer her.

She licked his nipple, raked her bottom teeth against the twitching pectoral, allowed her hand free rein over his hard front and wide back yet could not bring herself to look into his face. She felt then saw long black hair like a veil descend over her face. Was he looking down at her? What did he see? An object of ridicule, the source of his greatest pain and shame, someone against whom to curse? A woman...a fighter? Both.

Neither?

A gentle hand cupped her breast. Released it, traveled downward. She gasped when he wrapped it between her legs to follow the natural relief. Hair, lips, moist flesh. His long hand espoused her. It had been meant for this. Take the woman and tame the fighter.

She closed a hand over his erection, which was pressed against her hip, wrapped tender fingers around the living steel. A pulse against her thumb. Rhythmic and steady.

When he reached behind her thigh and pulled up to widen her, she let him. She knew what he wanted. Shared his hunger.

"Do you want me?"

Still, he did not answer.



A long moan left her as he glided against her sex. Muscles on his belly worked as he pushed. She wrapped a thigh around his middle, hoisted herself with an arm around his strong neck—still she did not look into his face—and waited for him to do that for which their bodies had been created. He took her.

After a single push, he pulled out. She tried to keep him to her but could not muster the strength. The more she tried, the less she succeeded. He floated a few feet away. Long ribbons of hair still hid a face she knew well. One she had come to love. Heat spread from her sex to her belly, upward, outward, warmed her body and soul. Liquid heat. Floating, as did everything else in this strange place, a trail of his semen linked them. Like a pearl necklace. The milk of gods. The beginnings of a world in each white pearl sheltered in her flesh.

“Do you want me?” she repeated.

Perhaps she had to find her own answer, clear out her own way.

Voices woke her. A soft tread, receding.

Smells of chemicals, plant life, male musk. The sound of water gurgling nearby lifted her spirits for no reason she could explain. Water meant life. Then crystalline water turned to blood. A vision flashed in her mind’s eye.

The Hadisian, the last gladiator standing. His eyes rolling in his head.

Opal opened her eyes at the same time as her body reacted to the mental image. She tried to sit, would have succeeded had Dar not pressed a large hand into her chest and gently but firmly pushed her back down. A faint burn bothered her right shoulder.

“What happened? Where are we?”

On either side stood white marble columns surmounted with elaborate capitals that appeared to have been dipped in molten silver. Large, exotic plants lined the walls behind the twin rows of columns. At the edge of her peripheral vision, a wide rectangle of amber sky. Either dusk or dawn, she could not tell. The sound of water filtered in.

“Whoa, don’t rush it, okay?” he replied, leaning into her to tuck a gauze-like sheet under her sides. She was naked with her nipples showing well through the flimsy fabric. “You’ve been shot, I’ve been stabbed a million fucking times, we both lost blood and probably some neurons as well. So just relax.”

The sting of regenerator patches tingled along her arms and shoulders. She scratched at a spot, winced when her shoulder flared. Adrian. He had shot her.

“Where are the others?” She accepted his helping hand and sat on what she discovered was a wide padded platform set on the floor. Dar, obviously bathed and wearing nothing but his long hair, wet and loose, sat on a low stool by her side.

“Makala is out there somewhere. He needed air, I think.”

Opal squeezed her eyes when Holly’s broken body invaded her mind. “And the other two?”

When he said nothing, she opened her eyes again to catch a dark half smile lifting the corner of his mouth.

"Dead? Both?"

"Never mind those scumbags. How do you feel?"

"Almost back to normal if a bit disjointed."

"That'd be the meds they gave you. Blood cell enhancers, stimulators, the works. Some to help you sleep as well."

"I think I was dreaming."

His gaze lowered to her breasts, which poked the white gauze from underneath. Her bronzed skin showed well through the white cotton threads. The subtle friction against her bare skin tightened her nipples, triggered remnants of her dream to intrude in her ability to think. She felt raw, hypersensitive.

"I don't know what you were dreaming about," he murmured, eyebrow arched. "But it sounded damn good."

"You were there. You were with me."

Black eyes fixed on her. Although he was not trying, even without the black beard—which had already started to shadow his face again—he still looked menacing. "Before I leave, we're gonna have to deal with that thing. It's sitting on my brain and it won't fucking move."

Before he left... Of course he would have to leave. Could not stay in a place that had so mistreated him. Her heart squeezed painfully. She clutched at the sheet by her hips. "What thing?"

Dar grimaced. "That thing," he replied, pointing at her, himself, then back again a couple of times. "Between you and me."

"Is it a burden?"

"Don't back me up in a corner, okay? I just saved your ass." A menacing smile spread wide, one with a hole at the corner. She could not explain it, but the small flaw suited him perfectly. "But I got to kick that little bastard in the teeth, so I guess I got something in return."

She had no need to ask which "little bastard" he meant. Either Thomasz or Adrian had deserved Dar Skara's brand of justice. Hadisian justice, even imperfect, far surpassed the Vespasian sort, which was lopsided at best.

Opal looked around at the luxurious chamber. "Where are we?"

"With that senator woman, the one with all the hair."

Mirth found its way into her. Her cheeks ached when she smiled. "That would be Senator Assiniboine."

"Yeah, bitchy old gal if you ask me. But I think we can trust her. For now at least."

"You have met with her?" Opal asked as she slowly rolled to her side and, ignoring Dar's scowl, rose to her feet, sheet somewhat around her and bunched in a hand. "What did she say?"

"She said," replied a voice she recognized, "that Hadisians are as freakishly large as they are endearingly vulgar."

The senator walked in from behind one of the columns, ensconced in voluminous white robes, a sharp contrast to her blue-black skin. Gold and metallic motifs at the cuffs and collar accented her garment. A commslink gleamed like a silver beetle at her ear. Opal was wondering how long she had stood there when she noticed another dark-haired woman coming out of a narrow door cut into the white marble. No jamb or handle. A secret door. This other woman, though young, possessed the senator's poise and hard blue eyes. A daughter perhaps?

She felt Dar tense by her side. Fists clenched. He stood as well. "You always sneak into your guests' bedrooms?"

The senator offered him a cold smile and a nod. "You are most welcome, Hadisian. I trust my hospitality is to your standards?"

He did not reply except for a narrowing of eyes.

"Seleria," Assiniboine said as she stopped a few paces from the bed. "I am glad to see you well. There is much to be done still."

The other woman passed her to stand in front of Dar. A collection of semi-diaphanous ribbons in every known shade of green wrapped around her thin frame and barely covered the essentials. "I want him." She turned to Opal. "I am willing to pay handsomely."

"Step the fuck back, woman," Dar growled, lowering his chin. "Before I forget the lady's hospitality."

Assiniboine grinned, this time genuinely. "Analeese, he was not meant for you." Turning her hard gaze on Opal, Assiniboine's smile disappeared. "Sanguis must be dealt with. Tonight after the last games."

She had been unconscious for the rest of the prior day and an entire night? She must have lost a lot of blood to take so long to recuperate. But she felt better now, ready for the battle she knew headed her way. Probably had for some time.

"I agree. But he has powerful friends, as you well know, Senator. I doubt anyone could remove him from his position."

"I meant he must be dealt with. Severely, permanently."

Fire returned a hundredfold. What he had done to Holly, the vile and horrible things, and also that to which he had subjected Dar. No one had ever so richly deserved to be punished. "I will do it."

Dar planted his fists on his hips. His eyes flashed. "Like hell you're going back to that crazy fuck's circus."

Assiniboine raised a hand. "These are your affairs, which do not concern me. Sanguis must be killed, and tonight. I have friends as well, but they will need proof of my...resolve. In fact, I have taken a step that perhaps I should have made sooner. I have *bought* support."

Analeese backed away from Dar, hungry gaze scanning his naked body. An illogical satisfaction, but it still pleased Opal to see no outward sign of arousal or even reciprocal interest from the Hadisian. Clearly, the senator's daughter did not appeal to him.

"I care little about method," the senator went on as she turned and left. Her voice still resonated. "Sanguis only ever had the power we granted him. And now we are taking it away."

Dar cursed under his breath. "Replace a tyrant with another."

"Senator Assiniboine may seem harsh to you, but she often was the only one with enough courage to speak up against Sanguis."

"Why the hell didn't anyone kill his ass sooner? It's not like he doesn't have enemies." He pointed at the space between columns where the women had disappeared. "She could've fried him much sooner. She has the means and obviously the will. So why now?"

"Because even though senators outrank praetors, Sanguis still has more power than anyone else on Vespas. Not officially, of course. But with the emperor's tacit approval, Sanguis was able to do as he pleased. Until yesterday. When Emperor Galba left during the games, he removed his support, left Sanguis open. Everyone bore witness."

"Politics."

Opal smiled sadly. "That is the Vespasian way."

He shrugged as he raked a hand in his hair. Muscles bulged along his flank and shoulder, triggered frissons down her spine. "Don't get me wrong, Hadi has its own class of assholes and politics, but dammit, when someone needs taken care of, they are. And right quick. We can't afford to lose time on shit like that. Argh, man, I can't wait to get back home."

She fought the pain down. "Perhaps a harsh climate would adjust our way of life as well."

His earlier words surfaced. Before he left, he wanted to deal with that "thing" between them. Hoping against logic, she shivered as she held the sheet tighter around her chest.

"What you said earlier..." she began, turned to face the large entrance filled with amber sunlight. Dawn rose beyond. She could see no rooftops and realized they stood very high in the senator's needle-thin compound, all blue glass and gray steel, a mix of beauty and harshness. Much like the woman herself.

She felt him approach behind her. Close. Not close enough. "You're not going back. I didn't save your ass to watch you put it back on the line. Fuck them. Let them do it."

"I am the only one who can and should do it. I have lost the most at his hands."

"Hello? I lost my *freedom*. Maybe I'm the one who should off him, huh?"

"He stole thirty-seven years of my life," she snapped louder than she expected. Deep breath. "Everything I believed in. He took that and he would have taken the rest as well."

"And what's that?"

"When I saw you standing there, surrounded by death, for the first time I felt lost. I was so scared, Dar Skara. That I was too late, that I had realized the lies my life had become only to watch you die before I could do anything about it. I felt powerless."

"You didn't answer my question. You've no idea how that burns my ass when people do that. What's 'the rest'?"

"My heart. Sanguis took my soul, my honor, but he would have taken my heart as well."

"Weren't you the one who kicked me out there to fight and 'die well'? Those were your words."

"My deepest regret."

"We all have those, I guess," he muttered. "Stuff we can't fix."

Even though she could not see his expression, she could easily detect his pain. "What is it you would fix if you could?"

A long intake of air preceded a hot hand landing on her shoulder. His thumb rubbed small and slow circles that engendered needs deep in her belly, needs she knew would for all intent never be satisfied with another man than this hirsute Hadisian.

"I lost someone dear not so long ago, and I'd be willing to give both legs to fix that and get her back."

Heat like a fever spread up her chest and engulfed her cheeks. She nodded, her heart breaking. She could never replace what he had lost. Dar Skara would be going back to Hadi. She would make sure of it. He deserved to return home and try to continue his life, which the Vespasians had interrupted at best and ruined at worst.

"But that's a whole other conversation," he said before running his other hand in her hair, which had been washed—faint tendrils of fruity scents tickled her nostrils—and left loose on her back. "I wanna deal with this one right here."

Dar reached around her, pinched the sheet and slowly pulled it away from her hand, uncovered her breasts and belly, thighs and knees, let it drop until she stood naked between the rising sun and the most beautiful male body she had ever known. Even if a lifetime of duty and sacrifice had meant little, even if her whole belief system had come tumbling down around her and regrets filled her, she would change nothing.

Except for one thing. She would have to redress that grievance. But not right away. Later.

"I wish to see the sun rising," she murmured.

Dar slipped his hand into hers, squeezed.

Together, they walked to the wide entrance. White marble columns, floors and walls gave way to a pillared stone terrace on which meandered a narrow brook, artificial but cleverly arranged to appear natural. Luxuriant foliage grew out of sunken pots, wide rubber-like leaves like hands toward the sun. Thicker and sturdier trees lined the terrace and beyond, a fence of high glass panes to provide shelter against the wind. A rooftop Eden that not even shuttles disturbed. Dawn bathed the scene in bronze, amber and copper hues.

He whistled appreciatively. "Nice."

She could help neither the grin nor noticing he had become hard. "Very much so."

"Look at me."

Opal turned to him and had to raise her chin high to meet his gaze. Except for the hair moving slightly, he could have been a majestic statue. All hard angles but with a gentler quality she had never before seen or noticed. Had the man a tender side to him?

In a black cascade, hair obscured his face when he angled it downward at her. She had seen this image before. Somewhere.

"Maybe I shouldn't stoke the fire, but when you're within fifty paces of me..." He shook his head. "My brain just melts. Usually, I'm the kinda guy who'll take the devil by the tail and give him a good yank. But this time—shit, this time I don't even know which end is which. What are you, Opal Seleria? A goddess or the devil?"

"I am a fighter and a woman. Nothing more."

"That's a helluva lot more than you think." His lips glistened after he moistened them. "To me, it doesn't get any better. Or any sexier."

"I cannot separate the two. You take one, you receive the other as well."

Through the curtain of hair a frown wrinkled the tattoo around his eye and temple. "Not a thing wrong with that."

From violet, her eyes darkened to almost indigo. Dar couldn't understand why she'd think being a fighter would make her any less desirable, less feminine. Hell, in his book, nothing beat a woman with some scars and a couple of calluses on her hands. Working hands, fighting hands. Who the fuck wanted some princess with manicured nails and perfect skin? They only meant she was a high-maintenance doll. Bah. He wanted a woman, a real woman who had shit to do other than fucking around with her feathers. Who'd lived and done things, gone places, achieved goals or cursed if she missed but would dust herself off, wipe the blood and try again. He wanted someone who could handle him.

"And you think that makes you less...what?"

She shrugged. The fresh pinkish scar on her shoulder reminded him he would've loved, *loved* snapping every last bone in Adrian's body. Lucky shit had died quickly.

"You're a woman," he said, cupping her chin and lifting it. With the angle, he could see a tiny little scar in her left eyebrow. He'd never noticed it. Sexy. "You're hot, you're big and beautiful and smart. So what if you were born on Vespas, huh?"

A sardonic grin pulled at her lips – those lush fruits on which he was about to feast. "Big?"

"Yeah," he replied while with his free hand he weighed a breast. Hot and heavy. Loved it. "Big. The way I like it."

A bit of a breeze tossed her hair over her shoulder. It was long. Much longer than he'd anticipated when it wasn't braided in a thick cord down her V-shaped back. Hot didn't begin to describe her. Maybe other guys wouldn't find her as attractive. Too much woman to handle. Well, he could.

"How's your shoulder?"

"I received very good care and feel almost no pain at all."

"Good. I'm asking because I'm trying to decide if I should take you hard or gentle."

A deep blush rose to her cheeks and made her throat blotchy. "And?"

"We'll see."

Her eyes flared when he abruptly captured her mouth with his. God, she tasted fine. Sweet but strong. The best damned mix.

Dar arched her back under the force of his kiss. Demanding, claiming. He took what she gave, seized more, everything. She was all his. Every angle and facet. The woman and the warrior. Breasts heavy and the perfect fit for his big mitts, he weighed them, cupped and squeezed them to his heart's content. He sucked her moan, forced the succulent mouth wider. He'd devour her if he could. Consume her.

Animalistic instincts superseded everything else when he abandoned a breast so he could wrap his arm around her middle, bend her back to expose more of her throat to him. He licked a long pass up her sternum and throat, bit her chin, sucked her bottom lip. She seemed to like that. Eyes closed, she smiled.

"Open your mouth, let me see that tongue."

Grinning, she licked her upper lip nice and slow. Must've known he liked it that way. On a growl, he took her mouth again.

When she dropped to her knees, he thought for a scary second something was wrong but quickly realized everything was right. Not only right. Perfect.

After a grin for him, she grabbed his cock, kissed it all around. The top of her head bobbed and moved sideways with her handling. He filled his hands with all that gorgeous hair the color of white gold. Was there a better thing in the whole fucking galaxy than making love to this woman? He didn't think so.

## Chapter Nine

Sun created multicolored halos around his head and on the curves of his shoulders. She forced her eyes to remain open despite the brightening light just for the sheer bliss of watching his skin glowing in the sun, or how his hair gently swayed with the faint breeze.

To merely touch him was a joy unto itself, but to share herself with him and him with her...pure bliss.

Opal squeezed her hand around him, glided her fist up and down his shaft, trapped the skin down at the base so she could make him tight for her, kissed and lipped gently the silky glans. A drop of pre-cum like a spherical diamond crowned his cock. She licked it off, the tiny tear, savored its salty-sweet quality because she feared too soon he would be stolen from her. Or more likely, she would have to leave him behind.

She pushed the intruding thought away. This intimate moment was theirs, not anything anyone, Sanguis included, could steal.

With a moan, she sucked hard on the head, licked it to make the skin glisten. Into her mouth she took him. Deeply. Lovingly. Muscles twitched on his thick thighs, his belly. Demanding, his hand cupped her nape and pushed deeper, showed her the rhythm he wanted and intensity he looked for. Opal gave him what he asked and more.

Each ridge and vein, every inch of him. She visited as a new guest would, greedily took like a thief, devoured as if her life would end if she did not feast on this man and took all he had to give. He pulled from her, grabbed her by the wrist, towed her to the brook.

"Sit," he said, pointing at a large flat rock by the waterside.

Opal did and leaned back on her hands when he knelt in front of her, reached to his right and cupped water into his large, square hand.

"Spread your legs."

She hissed a breath when he dribbled cold water down her belly. It coursed over her skin and entered her narrow blonde tuft to seep into her cleft, bringing coolness yet also creating fever to spread to her legs. Opal rolled her hips as he trickled more water on her. He finished by letting some dribble on him, from pectorals and shoulders to belly. The sight of his glistening skin, like liquid diamonds, was too much. She pounced, would have tackled any other man. But Dar Skara was not "any other man".

Thick muscles bulged and jerked in response to her feeding frenzy. She wanted to cover him with her mouth and hands. But he seemed to have the same urges since he gently pushed her onto her back.

"Open wide for me," he growled against her belly. Licked and teased her navel.



She hurriedly widened her legs. One heel against the edge of the rock, she waited for more. Yearned for it. From this man, she wanted everything. He kissed her thighs, belly and hips.

She *mmed* her appreciation.

"You like that?"

"Very much."

"You want more?"

"Yes."

More water preceded his mouth against her sex.

This time she let out a sharp yelp of anticipation. She remembered the last time he made love to her with his wicked mouth. By the side of the bath when they first met. He had left her standing on the edge, a breath away from explosive rapture. She doubted he would refrain from giving her release this time.

His tongue, that marvelous organ, lashed her while he sucked and kissed, sucked more, took her into him. Frissons tingled all over her skin. She had become a knot of senses for him, all hungering for his touch, for the release only he could grant, a gift only he would offer.

"Is that what I missed the last time?" he asked, teasing.

"And more."

"Hmm? What did you say?"

Opal arched her back for more after he licked a long and potent pass up her sex. Fingers entered her, knowing and proprietary. She gave him what he wanted—in the way she moved for him, with her voice as a stimulant, through the shivers that rocked her body and the desire that burned her soul. He took her. With his mouth. His fingers. Took what he wanted. Because it was his to take.

Reaching down by her side, she managed to reach his thigh, scratched him for the sheer pleasure of watching his eyes narrow between her legs.

"Move closer to me," she asked.

He pivoted to kneel by her middle. She clawed her way up his thigh, grabbed his cock then plopped back down. He was forced to follow her, did so with a growl as he tried to keep his face between her legs. Opal twisted to make his job—and achieving her pleasure—easier.

Smooth and beautiful in her hand, she pumped him hard. She pumped him fast. And when he showed signs of impending release, Opal did not relent and instead accentuated the cadence, the force with which she clutched him. When she knew he would come within seconds, she pulled herself closer, right underneath his glans and angled his penis down at her chest to receive him.

"Opal..." he snarled, eyes closed. He stopped devouring her for a few seconds.

On a spasm and a low groan, he came onto her stomach and between her breasts.

She had never let a lover release onto her. Never would have accepted the implied symbols of ownership and dominance. For Dar, she did.

Like a string of the whitest pearls, his semen shot out in quick and powerful jets that landed on her skin, hot ribbons, tokens of trust and love. Temporary at least.

While he resumed his feast with renewed vigor, she collected some of his cum to admire the silk dribble down her fingers. While he watched, she brought the pads of her two fore fingers to her bottom lip and tasted him. Opal had to close her eyes to sever the vision of his expression when she swallowed. The appreciation and happiness, shock and pure male pride there were too much to process. No man had ever looked at her that way.

"I want you to take me, Dar Skara," she murmured with her eyes still closed. "Take me as you would if we were never to share ourselves again."

"Shh," he replied as he pulled her wide with skilled fingers. "Don't talk like that."

Oh good fortune...

"Again."

Dar sucked on her clitoris hard enough to cramp her legs. She undulated to his fine work and waited for each suck with greediness. Anticipation. Then soon, she knew, fulfillment.

"Again," she growled this time.

He granted her wish.

"Harder, harder..." She fisted his hair with both hands. "Harder."

Never had she known the blinding pleasure to which he subjected her. Dar devoured her sex while he exposed more of her flesh with his hands. She throbbed for him. Shook and writhed.

On a long cry, she released just as he pushed his tongue into her.

He stayed there with his hands anchored around her hips as she thrashed and hit the rock with her fists. Unlike other orgasms, this one did not bring a wave and the sensation of bobbing about on a raging sea. This one, in a brilliant moment of pure white light, brought with it a physical stillness, a baring of her soul as though she had just poured all of herself out into the cosmos. Each second a twinkling star high in the firmament. A great languor took her. She abandoned herself to it and to its creator. The architect of her release.

After a moment of reprieve, Dar mock-bit the inside of her thigh. "Sit over me," he said as he lay back. Strong hands grabbed her waist and lifted her.

Opal rolled on top of him. Her hair fell in a cascade over his chest and tickled her nipples and the tender flesh on her injured shoulder.

"You're beautiful," he murmured. "So beautiful it hurts my brain." He wrapped tender hands over her breasts. He was the first lover able to cover them. "Look at those, just perfect for me. Like they'd been meant to, right?"

"Our bodies were meant for this," Opal agreed as she raised herself on her knees. Dar squeezed his eyes shut when she sank over him.

Heat pulsed as she took him deep into herself. Sexually with his cock sheathed to the hilt, visually by locking gazes with him, emotionally through what they had shared so far and finally, Opal took Dar lovingly because this was the sentiment that filled her. Love. For him, all he stood for, his flaws and virtues.

Up, higher then back down. Every penetration squeezed a moan from her, a groan from him. Their voices rose. Again and again. The oldest chant.

From tender, his hands turned exigent. Fingers dug into flesh. The force of his thighs lifted her off the ground. Displaying incredible strength and precision, he heaved, rolled her underneath him by using his protective arm as a pivot. When he rose between her legs, hair obscuring his face, she thought she had seen that image somewhere. The primal beauty and strength.

Staring into her eyes through his bangs, he never said a word as he raised her knees and tucked them under his arms so he could grab her bottom and hoist her higher. From burning, her distended sex began to tingle pleurably. And he knew it because he pushed in to the end of him, retreated by only an inch or so then bucked back in. Opal cried out. He did it again. Harder. She knew he welcomed her vocal appreciation and would push that much deeper every time she let out a gasp. So she did. Opal taunted him with demands and challenges only to reap the implacable rewards his hips imparted.

Black hair quivered with the potency of his thrusts. Thick shoulders bulged. Pectorals corded. Opal arched her back to the limit of physical endurance and welcomed Dar into herself. Each push, each retreat she punctuated with a gasp or a cry.

Dar rose higher still, extended her legs by trapping the ankles, which he kept at arm's length. Her legs in a wide V, Opal became his goal, his target, his haven and refuge from the world. Heat spread up from her sex, her legs. While he took her, she reached between her legs to part herself wider, rub her clitoris round and round with shaking fingers, tremors that soon reached her legs and belly. A body-shiver rocked her. On a long cry she came. A second later Dar joined her.

Shivering and panting, he collapsed on top of her. The great weight felt like a shelter constructed of male power, a haven she never wanted to leave. Sweat on sweat made a perfect seal between their bodies.

"Christ," he said in her ear. "I can hardly move."

A fit of chuckles took her, traversed her body and tightened her vaginal muscles around him. Grinning wide, he pulled from her, rolled onto his back with great verbal punctuations then let his hand trail into the brook.

He flicked some at her, yawned wide. "We need a plan."

She felt her grin waver then leave. One *was* needed. But it did not include him.

Loath to ruin the moment, she lay by his side, watched him breathe and, with the angle, his cock gradually sank below his rib cage.

"But first we need a nap." He patted her hip. "I have stuff to tell you. When my brain is back on, I'd like you to hear it. You there?"

Opal pretended to sleep, breathing deep as she lay on her side with an arm draped over his chest. She did not have the heart to lie to his face nor did she want to see the disappointment—or even rage—in his eyes when she told him about her plan.

"I don't know about you," he whispered as he stroked her hair. "But I wouldn't change a thing in my life right now."

After he kissed the top of her head, she felt him start to relax and grow heavier. Despite her best efforts, oblivion soon closed a warm embrace over her as well.

Sometime later, she did not know when precisely, she opened her eyes to discover that the sun had risen over them, sprinkled sapphires and diamonds in the brook gently gurgling among synthetic rocks, then it dipped below the roof edge once more. Dar lay on his back, both arms and legs out wide, hair in a mess, snoring. Obviously, the man slept alone. A fit of chuckles took her but she subdued it for fear of waking him. She allowed herself the luxury of watching him sleep. Even for a little while. She might not get another chance. Opal looked eastward and grimaced. The sky had deepened on the horizon. Stripes of orange and bronze. Gathering clouds.

The time had come.

She rose without sound, padded to the chamber into which she had known the best hours of her life, gathered one set of clothes laid on the platform and her boots, cleaned by another unseen, unnamed servant. *Vespasian society* hinged on these faceless people toiling over never-ending tasks. After tonight, things would change. Maybe. But then again, perhaps change would only last a few months, if that. Still, it would make a difference to some. Her gladiators at least. And it was all she could do.

Opal did not look back. She was forsaking her heart, no use leaving her courage behind as well. Because if she caught sight of Dar, oblivious and content as he slept off the exhaustion of their intimate moment—precious hours just the two of them—she would lose her resolve and squeeze back into his arms.

Duty called. Loudly. And this time, she would not abide by the dictates of another but would follow her own tenets.

Door closed softly behind her, she dressed in all haste, donned her boots then rushed down the corridor, white marble like the rest, to find someone, anyone who could direct her to the landing pad. She suspected the senator had thought of everything and prepared transport as well as clothes. Perhaps also weapons. Opal would not need those.

Assiniboine indeed had foreseen all of Opal's needs since a handsome young man in white robes waited around the corner of an airy hall colonnaded with crystal pillars that reflected light stabbing in slanted through apertures in the ceiling. He bowed twice, enjoined her to follow him with a small nod then padded on silent feet through a series of archways twice as high as her. They met no one. She felt cut off from the world. The

senator had undoubtedly told her household to keep out of this affair. Opal should have felt ashamed, tainted to be preparing to go murder a man in his own home. She did not.

The young man opened a narrow door cut into the wall proper, held it for her as she walked by and into a cavernous garage where a collection of shuttles sat lined by size from small, personal vehicles to a mammoth intersystem spacecraft. Without a word he took her to one of the first shuttles, a white affair with tinted windows. On the conical nose, the tag had been sandblasted off. No one would know who had supplied it.

"Thank you," she said to the young man, who bowed twice and left.

The side hatch was already raised. Hydraulic tubes gleamed like liquid silver when she grabbed one and climbed into the shuttle. Luxurious interior. Black polyurethane stitched to resemble leather, chrome trim, and on a narrow ledge by the last row of seats, an assortment of weapons. Kinetic energy guns, long-range rifles, stunners and an item that brought tears to her eyes. How could it have ended up here? Leaning against the bulkhead, her mother's pila still showing, despite the repairs, the place where Dar had snapped it. The last time she had seen the weapon was on the floor of Sanguis' bedchamber. Opal retrieved it, weighed it. The comfortable, familiar feel made her nod. A fitting end for Sanguis, who had polluted what was once a glorious part of Vespasian culture. Who had contributed to her mother's untimely death, a broken woman and ruined fighter.

A presence alerted her senses. She did not need to turn around to recognize the heavy tread.

"Maybe you thought I wouldn't see this one coming."

Good fortune...

Opal turned to the hatch. Dar stood just outside the hull, panting, dressed in the same blue cargo pants as the senator's guards wore, knee-high black boots and a shiny, skin-tight blue mock-neck used as undergarment to the uniform. No shirt must have fit him. She was surprised they had found boots that did.

"You should not have followed me," Opal said as she set the pila back against the bulkhead. Her heart pounded arrhythmically for a few seconds before settling back to a normal cadence. He had expected it.

Dar leaned over and entered the shuttle. His presence filled it. Slicked back over his skull, his hair glistened and cascaded in thick strands over his shoulders. "Sneaking out? That's not like you."

"I do not want to fight with you over this. Go back to Hadi, Dar Skara. Go, live happily and try to forgive Vespasians and what we have done to you."

She truly did not want to fight with him over this. Not when she stood on the precipice. A breeze would send her back into his arms. Leaving Sanguis' mess and crimes to go unheeded. She could not do this. She had hid her head in the sand for far too long. Time for action had come. No matter the price to herself.

"Don't get me wrong," he said. "You're more than capable of kicking some serious ass. I like that. Makes me horny as hell. But you tend to get tunnel vision." He joined her by the selection of weapons, ran a hand down the different muzzles and butts, lips pursed as someone would perusing a shelf of books. "You need someone to watch your back for this job. Then I'll go home. Not before."

"Why?" she retorted. "You are free now."

Dar shook his head. "I'd pay good money to see you hand Sanguis his balls. Like hell I'm gonna miss that. Plus, you do need help."

"I do not. This is my battle to fight. Alone."

"Nope. Not gonna happen. Sanguis isn't alone, so why should you go there without backup?"

"Because it is the way of things. And I might not even succeed," she countered, even if inside his support warmed her. She would give everything to just live her life by his side. No interruptions, no responsibilities. "You do not know him the way I do. Praetor Sanguis never played fair."

"See, that's what I mean. You play fair." Dar grabbed the long-range rifle, tested it for fit, must have decided he liked the feel since he slung it over his shoulder. He also slipped one of the kinetic energy guns into the waistband of his pants, retrieved another that he kept in his hand. A dark smile on his lips, he turned to her. "But I don't."

Opal could not speak for several seconds as she fought the lump down her throat. Tears stung her eyes. She nodded.

"And when we're done with him," Dar said, drawing near and pinching her chin. "Then I'll go home."

Opal nodded. What else had she expected? Vespasian ways had plucked this man from his homeworld and forced him to fight in their games. Understandably, now that he was free, Dar would go back home. As much as her logical side knew this course of action to be the best – the only – way, her heart still broke. She had been hoping...

## Chapter Ten

She was so beautiful to him, sitting at the controls as they flew back to Sanguis' nuthouse. They were probably going back to death and nastiness, not in that order, he was sure, but goddammit, they'd go down with a clump of someone's hair in their fists. Fucking right!

Dar tested the long-range rifle again. He liked the size of it more than the actual ability to shoot something at fourteen hundred paces. The thing had more range than the coliseum was wide. Still, he liked the weight, the three-foot-long silvery affair covered in metallic "veins" and tiny controls. Would make for a perfect bludgeoning weapon.

From the sky, Sanguis' compound was almost beautiful. It really did resemble the apogee of the old Earth Roman Empire. At its heart throned the huge oval coliseum made of travertine stone blood-red under the dying sun. Rows of arcades that stood one on top of the other made the most of the outer wall while all around the rim hoverboards formed a giant crown. Yeah, almost beautiful if it weren't such a grotesque show of Small Man Syndrome. But then again, all Vespasians were small to him.

No shuttles on any of the landing pads. The fights must have been over for a while. All around the perimeter wall and halfway up silver flagpoles, long red banners fluttered.

As Opal set the shuttle down on the highest terrace near the coliseum proper, Dar stood and put his hand on the lever, waiting for the three skids to touch down before he raised the hatch, scanned for trouble with the scope of his rifle.

"No greeting party? Don't tell me he doesn't know we're coming. Everyone knows everything around here."

Opal passed him, pila in hand, looking magnificent in her black tunic and short red skirt. What skin he could see above the boots and below the skirt shone like satin the color of bronze. Shit, no worse time to get horny.

"He knows we are here," she replied. "He is waiting."

"For what?"

"For me to make the first move."

Dar shook his head. "And what's that we're doing right now? That motherfucker is missing a couple of neurons."

"He enjoys toying with people's minds most of all. Even as children, when we had little contact, I still knew he enjoyed causing others pain, but always in small measure and over long periods. But his father, just like my mother, did not deal with it."

"Like I said, fucked up."

Opal stepped down and into open terrain without so much as a look around. For fuck's sake! He rushed ahead of her, muzzle sweeping in a wide arc and backpedaled to a flight of stone steps. No one inside the large arch. Shit. Dar didn't like it one damn bit.

Up the steps and through the arch then into the building proper. No one. The only sound the evening breeze *whoo-ing* through the long colonnaded hallway. Between each column, dying rays of sunlight stabbed in at forty-five degrees to illuminate mosaic floors depicting gladiatorial scenes increasingly more graphic the deeper they penetrated the building. Every other foot gleamed splashes of blood—tiny red tiles in waves and serpentine patterns—and made Dar shake his head. That praetor was messed up in his pretty head.

Opal turned to him, surprised him with a quick but tender kiss. "I would have loved you with all my being, Dar Skara of Hadi."

"Hey, what are—"

She kissed him again, gave him a sad grin that pinched something inside his chest. Damn. What the fuck was that? "Don't talk like that."

Smiling still, she turned away and marched down the hallway. Didn't creep, didn't sneak around. In the middle of the hallway.

Damn.

He rushed to stand in front of Opal since she didn't seem willing to take cover. Was it courage, bravado or a death wish? As if she didn't care what happened! Well he cared. A whole fucking lot. His heart beat fast. Adrenaline pumped hard.

They walked deeper into the coliseum, passed a goddamn forest of pillars, all three times as thick as he was and at least four times as high. On the ceiling, midnight blue paint and what he suspected to be fiber optics created a night sky. Any other day it would've been beautiful. Today it was just creepy.

"I don't like the smell of this," he snarled, looking sideways and back. "Let's get the fuck out—"

The first shot missed the tip of his boot by a few inches. The second passed close enough to leave fire in its wake. He leaped back, discharged a few shots between the two columns where the telltale blue-white flashes gave the shooter away. A snarl of pain satisfied Dar he'd hit something.

To his awe, Opal never wavered, never blinked and never slowed her terrible advance. They'd woken her up, the angry goddess, the sleeping dragon lady, and now had to taste her revenge. Had he not been busy exchanging shots with unseen enemy, Dar would've pushed her up against the wall for a disorderly go. Never in his life had he seen anything so fucking sexy and scary as the sight of her striding purposefully down the covered passage, oblivious and impermeable to energy shots zipping by from the right then from the left. She really was a goddess come to life!

Dar ran ahead of her, put a couple of shots around the corner before he poked his head out, spotted two forms lying still. As he approached, he shot each once. Just in



case. Vespasian lying sacks of shit. Could never be too careful. Behind him, Opal marched on, pila in hand, loose hair in a white-blond halo.

Enemy fire doubled, tripled. From behind pillars, around corners, even from chance shots as guards rushed across the hallway or rolled into view. He slung the rifle across his back, pulled out the second kinetic energy gun. Dar got rid of those scumbags real quick. They wanted to die? No problem!

Cries of the wounded filled the air, plaster from shots hitting walls fell on them, even tiles burst up from the floor. Opal remained steadfast.

They reached a section he recognized. The arena proper would be just down to the left of the rounded corridor that formed a sort of ring poked with several doorways for various houses' gladiators. All the portcullises were raised. By the corner of his eye he spotted a lone figure standing in the middle of the arena. Dressed entirely in gold armor. So Sanguis really had been waiting. Didn't he know she'd kill his ass in two minutes flat? Maybe he meant to die? But obviously they hadn't expected for her to have any backup. Fucked up the praetor's little plan, did it? Tough shit. He'd probably placed men to shoot her down when she was done. Or maybe before she reached the fight, get a shot into her, weaken her, bring her down to the cocksucker's level.

Anger swelled Dar's chest. Nothing he disliked more than cheaters. "You get Sanguis!" he growled, sparing an arm to cover her as she reached a doorway that lead into the arena. Couldn't help it. Built in with the rest. Stupid protective male genes!

"Fight well," she said, not even rushing.

As she passed him, violet eyes narrowed in intent, he knew as surely as if someone had written it on the wall. He loved her.

*Great timing, Skara. Fucking A.*

As soon as Opal stepped through the doorway, the portcullises in every doorway fell, pierced the sand by a few inches. He had been waiting. As he said he would.

But she was past caring about what Sanguis said or did. He had hurt too many people she loved and respected—Dar Skara first and foremost—committed too many crimes. And the time to pay was now.

"Seleria," he called from his position dead center in the arena. "I was not expecting you to bring another to the block. Thank you for the gift." He smiled as he brought his pila in a mock salute. "The Hadisian will last a long time, I have no doubt."

Without slowing down, Opal snapped the pointed end of her pila upward, executed a completed rotation that made the weapon whistle loudly before walking a circle around her enemy.

Sanguis grinned, bowed. "Let us—"

Her attack interrupted his next tirade. She had listened to this man's bilious words for too long.

Shock registered on the handsome face when she charged, pila low and to the left, aiming at his legs. He barely had time to leap away. The sharpened pole dug into the sand.

"I thought a gladiator should always wait for the other to attack," he remarked through a strained smile. "Was it not your first rule?"

Opal stabbed low and direct, snarled in satisfaction when she caught him on the thigh. He bounced sideways while bringing his own weapon down on hers. The shock reverberated up her arms.

He backpedaled from her next attacks, all aimed at his legs. Palms facing away from her, she delivered devastatingly quick thrusts, swings and strikes that Sanguis parried at great cost to his armor, which bore several perforations on the breastplate and leg guards. Blood seeped from a gash on his shoulder. Yet he seemed to enjoy himself immensely.

"How long do you think he will last?" he snarled. "I have guards all around the arena. Your Hadisian will not make it out of here. Neither will you."

The words stung deep. She wished Dar would not have followed. He was a free man yet threw it all away to fight by her side. Although the fight was his almost as much as it was hers.

"Another loved one you will have taken from me."

"I expected more from you, Seleria. Where is the honor in leading a friend, a lover, to his death?"

Opal extended her right arm, twisted her wrist a split second before Sanguis could parry and struck his wounded shoulder. He winced as he kicked sand at her.

"You break my heart," he growled. "Such dirty tricks from an illustrious Seleria."

Through a rapid, if clumsy, twist, he tried for a joint-lock at her elbow that she could have blocked with one hand.

She used his own pila's leverage to sweep him off his feet. He stumbled back, could not keep his equilibrium and landed heavily on his butt.

"Your chest is hollow, Praetor. You have no heart."

He snapped back to his feet. Rage deformed his handsome face. After he spat blood—perhaps he had bit his vile tongue—he attacked. Fierce and quick, he twirled his pila end on end, creating a whistling sound and a blur of movement. Despite the showy display, Opal methodically parried, blocked and counterattacked. After a potent strike to her thigh—pain radiated all through her leg but she forced her face to remain impassive—Sanguis surprised her by taking one hand off his weapon.

She should have known he would try something underhanded.

Too late, Opal tried to push him back with her knee. But the taller and heavier man used his size to barrel into her, send her sprawling on her back while he landed on her with a twisted smile and blue eyes blazing.

"It is you I should have brought to my bed," he murmured. Opal *humph*-ed when he punched her low in the belly. "She was tight at first, but blood is an excellent lubricant."

Opal raised her knee quick and hard and caught him between the legs. It was his turn to growl in pain. She rolled away, felt a sting on the back of her arm, climbed to her knees but could not seem to stand on her feet. Everything spun around her. She rubbed her arm, discovered a patch, which she ripped off and tossed to the ground. A strange chemical taste invaded her mouth. She blinked, closed her hand tighter around her pila.

"Coward," she murmured as she fought nausea. "You... Coward... Poison?"

He smiled. Or she thought he did. Everything spun. "Only a mild sedative."

The praetor stood in front of her, blocked out what remained of the sun. Had his hair always been so airy? It floated around his head like a male Medusa. The coliseum spun fast. Around and around. Sky, stone, sky, stone. Dizzy, she forced her eyes to focus on the hated face.

"Perhaps I am a coward. But you are a fool, a puppet with its strings cut off. Just like your mother before you when she discovered the lies she had been telling herself –"

"You are the liar."

Sanguis chuckled. "Have you nothing else to say, the last Seleria, last fool in a long line of fools? No words of honor and wisdom and self-sacrifice? Do you want to know what your mother said to me after she discovered her beloved fighters had not earned their freedom but a quick death instead?" Sanguis grabbed her by the tunic and hoisted her to his face. After a rough kiss, he licked his lips. Detestable old habit. "She begged me not to tell you. She was too weak to even deal with that. Just as you are."

Opal's fist had slipped to within a few inches of the pila's pointed end. With all the strength she could muster, she stabbed Sanguis right under the rib cage.

His eyes flared. "Argh!"

Liquid heat spread over her hand and between her fingers, made her grip slick. He yelped, shoved her back. Opal could not keep her balance and collapsed. Whatever he had put into the regenerator patch dulled her senses to the point she could barely feel her limbs.

"You bitch," he yelled. "You bitch!"

Two-handed, blood seeping from beneath his armor, he brought his pila up high above his head, as one would throw a javelin with both hands. Aimed at her heart.

The moment burned an imprint of itself in her brain. Opal knew she had delivered a killing blow. He would not last long without a healer. She would pay the ultimate price, but at least she would bring Sanguis down with her. A small comfort since she had lost Dar. But at least she had ended the praetor's bloody tyranny.

The moment lasted forever.

Somewhere behind her, the sound of a long-range rifle. A single shot. A shudder suddenly passed through Sanguis at the same time as his weapon snapped in half above his head. He let out a great howl of pain. Brought his arms down. Horrified, he shrieked incoherently. One of his hands had been reduced to a mass of ruined flesh and protruding, charred bones.

Opal did not wait. She grabbed her own pila resting in the sand by her knee, closed a fist around it and, as she stood to face Sanguis, brought it hard in an upward thrust.

When her fist pressed against his belly, his eyes bulged then welled, his mouth worked yet no sound came out other than a gulped intake of air. With the angle, the pointy end, rendered glistening red with his blood, jutted up behind his shoulder.

The sound of the portcullises opening accompanied her as she sank to the sand, knelt there with both hands by her sides as she witnessed Sanguis' fall as if in slow motion to end kneeling as well. Facing her. The pila digging in the sand, a grotesque support to his slumped form. Blood slicked her weapon down to the middle then into the sand proper where it spread in a dark stain.

The sight of Dar with Commander Illo on his heels sprinting into the arena and skidding to a halt made her want to smile. Dizziness overtook her and she felt sand crunching against her shoulder blades. She had fallen onto her back.

"What's wrong?" Dar growled as he fell to his knees by her side. "What did he do?"

"A sedative," Illo replied, and cringed when Dar turned murderous eyes to him. "It will not kill her, just slow her. He wanted for her to...erm, he wanted for her to feel everything."

After a kiss to the back of her hand, Dar stood. Had Opal not been dizzy and confused, the sight of his rage would have sent her running. She had never witnessed such hatred. His eyes had become black ice.

"You stay with her," Dar said, turning away. "And if there's a hair out of place when I come back..."

Dar grabbed Sanguis by the back of his armor, tugged to dislodge the pila from the ground. To her surprise, a moan indicated the man still lived. Not for long.

"This is for that servant girl you killed," Dar snarled into the man's face, shook him to get a response. "Maybe you thought no one cared about one slave. I do."

He then towed the praetor behind him. A groove in the bloody sand connected Opal's knees to Sanguis' feet. The line became dotted then disappeared when Dar reached the arched doorway and left the arena.

Illo knelt on one knee, offered his hand. Opal looked at it for a moment before clasping it. He helped her to her knees, but she could go no farther. Sky, stone, sky, stone. Everything spun crazy circles. How long did she kneel in the sand, looking up at the sky slashed in copper and brown? Clouds rolled by as if in accelerated motion, shredded, reformed, separated. A breeze caressed her cheek.

"I know it does not matter anymore," Illo said at length as he unclasped his cape and wrapped it around her shoulders. "But I would change things if given the chance."

"It does matter," Opal replied through her teeth. "Because I think we just were."

"I should have intervened sooner." He looked skyward, cleared his throat. "The least I could do was to send your pila to the senator. It was only fitting that Sanguis should die at its end."

"It was."

He nodded, looked up behind her head then made room as Dar returned. Alone.

"Get lost," he snarled as he knelt by her. His eyes flashed. Primeval instincts forced her to remain silent.

The commander backed away and, with a last nod for Opal, left the arena.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're okay. You *are* okay, right?" From hateful, his gaze grew gentle.

Opal would have nodded but feared triggering another bout of nausea. "Yes," she whispered. "I had to do it, Dar. You understand that, do you not?"

Dar cupped her chin so she would face him. "I know you had to do this. I understand and I respect that. But you're gonna have to accept I have instincts too, they're built-in with the rest and I can't just sit on my hands and watch my woman get into a fight and not help. Not get involved."

*My woman.*

She rolled it over in her mouth as she would a sip of sweet wine. "Your woman?"

He brushed hair from her face. As long as she focused on his face—that beard was growing back amazingly fast—nausea and dizziness did not affect her so much. "You turned into 'my woman' the first time I laid eyes on you. Don't tell me you didn't see it."

"I was hoping... But I can never replace her, the one you lost."

A wide grin split his face, deepened the dimples and crinkled his tattoo. He actually chuckled. "You weren't jealous of my Nan, were you? She'd get a kick out of that."

"Your Nan?"

He nodded, kissed her on the cheek. She realized a tear rolled down. He had kissed it off. "Rest her soul—my Nan, she's the one I lost." He kissed another tear off her cheek. "What do you say we go back to our charming hostess and borrow a shuttle? I think she owes us that much."

"A shuttle to where?"

Her heart was about to burst from joy. She had thought her life fulfilled with her duties and newfound hope Assiniboine's dealings had brought. Yet nothing had prepared her for the delight simple words could bring. Her love was not unrequited after all. She sighed in contentment.

"I need to go back home and settle a few things. You're welcome to join me if you want. You'd have to get used to the looks though. We have hotties, but nothing like you." His smile turned darker. "Of course, I'd have to break their legs."

"Of course," she replied through tears and a wide grin. "I would expect nothing less from 'my man'."

"Good, it's settled then."

"And after," she went on, sobering, "I need to confront the changes I have triggered. I need to help the senator fight her way through to the emperor. She will need my help."

"She'll need *our* help. The weather here is much better than on Hadi. I might just stay and I don't care who it pisses off."

Opal could not think of a happier day despite the dramatic events. "We will change things, Dar Skara. We will make life better for those who have no voice."

Dar stood and, before she could protest, he scooped her up in his arms. Opal probably could have walked back to the shuttle but preferred to let him fuss over her. Time would come soon enough for more fights and confrontation. Right now nothing else mattered than allowing the man she loved—that hirsute Hadisian—to carry her in his arms if he wanted to. *She* did. She wanted to feel like a woman first and foremost for a change. She had been a fighter all her life. High time for a short reprieve. For love.

Opal wrapped an arm around Dar's nape, kissed his throat then let her head loll on his shoulder. And as he turned toward the closest doorway, she spotted across the coliseum high above the perimeter wall, halfway up the flagpole, a form dressed in gold. Sanguis hung there, the long banner the color of blood wrapped and tied around him. Against the dusk, the armor scintillated.

## Chapter Eleven

If anyone would've told him he'd one day fall for a Vespasian, he'd have kicked them in the nuts for insulting him. Weren't all Vespasians shiftless, lunatic fatheads? Apparently not. As he looked at his woman standing proudly behind that bitchy senator with the viper tongue—senator *Ass-iniboine*, as he liked to call her...behind her back—his heart swelled with pride. Now there was a woman. A real one. All his.

Everyone had moved up in the weeks following Sanguis' death. Gladiator trainer had become Praetor—he loved teasing Opal by calling her “Praetor” in bed, she hated that. Senator up to Head of the Imperial Senate. Whatever the fuck *that* meant. A notch higher than the rest of the senators, he guessed. Which was good, because if she'd had pull before, *Ass-iniboine's* power now rivaled that of the emperor's. Opal had told him Emperor Galba only tolerated an imperial senator in hopes that potential assassination attempts would start there first and thus give him advance warning.

Charming Vespasian politics. No wonder Makala had left on the first available freighter. A generation ship, no less. The guy intended to spend the rest of his life in space. Not that he blamed him. Dar would be fit to be tied if he'd lost his Opal.

The old woman's signature hadn't even been dry when she'd decreed slavery illegal unless for labor force. Well, it was a start. But no more games to the death. That'd been the price of Opal's support—hers and all the prominent families like hers who wished for the old ways to make a return. He wasn't sure the good old days were much of that, but it couldn't be any fucking worse than right now. At least no one could throw his ass in jail anymore. He'd gotten a kick out of *that*! From slave to free man in the span of a few days. He technically still “belonged” to Opal Seleria as part of her house—which she'd taken from Sanguis with Illo's support and troops. Dar Skara was listed there on her assets right beside household goods and effects. Ha!

She'd been mortified when they'd brought her the list to sign. He just thought it was the weirdest fucking thing ever. And kinda funny.

An asset. Yeah, he'd give them an asset all right, the cretins.

With the speech over, both women regally stepped off the dais to the other senators' polite applause. As head of her security detail, Dar had access to everywhere Opal did. Which had become part of his daily entertainment routine since her appointment as praetor. He loved nothing better than showing up in her wake, glowering at the lot of them, prissy cocksuckers and backbiters. The devious little monkeys in dresses kept pretty damn quiet around her, that was for damn sure. She pretended not to notice or care that he acted like a rabid gorilla on growth hormones around her. If that wasn't love, he didn't know what was.

"Please do not tarry," the senator said to Opal as she nodded her goodbyes. "Emperor Galba will try to create a wedge between us at the first opportunity. We must make sure to convince him trying to divide our alliance would be extremely bad. For him." She turned to Dar, cracked a rare smile. "Good day, Hadisian."

He didn't reply, just arched his eyebrow. Her smile widened before it disappeared as she turned to her daughter and both left, talking animatedly in each other's ear.

"You think he will?" Dar asked of Opal.

That red gown thing she wore parted up the leg was doing a number on his self-control. Her nipples showed really well through the fabric too, which excited him on the one hand and pissed him off to no end whenever he'd catch a man looking too low in her direction. Whenever men looked at his woman, they'd better keep their eyeballs under control or he'd be happy to shove them down their throats.

She shrugged, which made her muscled shoulder gleam with whatever lotion she'd applied that morning. He loved her scent. Like fruit. Made him hungry.

"He is a difficult man to gauge. I hope for all our sakes he will see the wisdom of keeping the senate united."

Dar waited until they were alone in one of the senate's airy antechambers. He locked the door as soon as it swished closed. Not that he was paranoid or anything...

White marble, steel framework, glass ceiling and red accents. If it hadn't all been so damn ostentatious, it could've been a beautiful place. Everything on Vespas was just so over the top. And a waste of material. On inhospitable Hadi, such waste and misuse of resources would mean death. But he wasn't on Hadi. In fact, he'd returned only to put his affairs in order then get the hell off before winter hit the small colony. He wouldn't miss it. Nan—rest her soul—would understand.

"But the senate's *not* united," he retorted. "You guys keep bickering about every last fucking detail. It's a fucking zoo in there, nothing ever gets done."

Opal grinned. Nothing turned him on quicker than that grin. "If we truly disagreed to the degree you just described there would be far fewer senators with whom to argue, believe me. Figuratively speaking, a knife between the shoulder blades is a common end for a senator."

"Figuratively'? You're turning me on when you talk dirty."

He planted his hand on the wall by her head, let his other travel down her muscled shoulder until the tips of his fingers touched her garment. Stopped there. Waiting.

She shivered. Violet eyes stubbornly held his. A challenge. "Why stop there?"

"Got to know if it's wanted first." Adrenaline cramped his thighs. That was a nice, smooth wall right there, perfect for what he—constantly—had in mind.

"And what if hypothetically it is not?" To her credit, she could keep her face straight even if he could feel her body beginning to tense. Those gorgeous nipples never lied.

Dar shrugged and let his hand fall by his side. "Then it wouldn't happen."



With a roll of her eyes, Opal seized his hand and pressed it directly on her breast. “I said hypo—”

She took a quick breath when he slipped his hand underneath the fabric and cupped her breast. The nipple felt like a baby olive. Just as round and hard. He squeezed it.

“Look at that,” he murmured before tucking his bottom lip between his teeth. “Mmm.”

He angled his hand to loosen the garment from her wide golden belt and denuded her breast. He looked at it, took his time. In the sunlight that flooded the airy hall it was pink enough to blind him. Unable to resist, he bent over and pushed it up to meet his lips, trapping the rosy point.

The charged look she gave him was only icing on the cake. His cock hardened painfully against the polyurethane uniform he was forced to wear. He hadn’t wanted to at first. Wear that dumb thing? A leather *skirt*? He fucking thought not! But she’d admitted that it was a turn-on for her, to see his naked legs and arms. So what if he had to walk around in a short leather skirt, a white tunic and bits of armor? He sure as hell wouldn’t pass up the chance to make her horny. At least the thing was well *vented*. Ha.

“Look what you’re doing to me, *Praetor*,” he snarled as he seized her hand and pushed it against his hard-on.

She squeezed his package through the tunic and skirt, smiled teasingly. “You did this to yourself, *gladiator*.”

Oh the little—

A soft moan left her when he crushed his mouth to hers. The beauty of making love to a fellow fighter...she could take what he dished out, turn it right around and lob it back in his court. He *loved* that. Loved taunting her until she turned the tables on him. And it always ended the same way. With him taking her hard and fast, to both their hearts’ content. Because he loved her, and to his undying shock and *thrill*—what woman in her right mind would put up with his shit—she loved him back.

Opal had only had eyes for her handsome head of security for the entirety of the imperial senator’s speech. Sure she had paid attention during the most important passages—new legislation always created fresh, dangerous alliances—but it had been superficial. Burning lust had made her repeatedly check the clock floating high near its magnetized plate on the wall as she waited until she would let the man corner her. The last two hours had felt like torture.

Dar’s kiss presently softened from rampage to mere assault. She fisted his hair, forced his mouth harder against hers, moaned when he bit her lip. Opal felt him unclip the wide belt that sheathed his weapons, heard it clatter to the marble floor before he pushed it away with his foot while still latched on to her. She *humph*-ed when he plastered her against the wall, forced a thigh between hers, raised her hand and ground it high above her head. With his height, it barely reached above his forehead. Such a

large and powerful man. Size and disposition a perfect match to her own. He filled all her senses. His male scent mixed with the old-fashioned product he used to shave. He had re-grown his beard but nowadays kept it neatly trimmed and short, which only poured fuel on her inner fire. She loved when he rubbed his bristly chin all over her.

It stroked her skin in a thrilling way as he abandoned her mouth to press burning kisses against her throat and under her ear. His polymer armor crushed her breasts. She welcomed the pressure, the thrilling weight. Because she only wore her toga to administrative affairs, she could feel each tantalizing angle and point digging into her flesh.

Abandoning her breast, Dar squeezed his hand between her legs and curved his fingers over her mons. Through the fabric, she felt moisture seep through and warm his fingers.

"You've been ready for a while, haven't you?" A triumphant growl rumbled in his chest. He dug his fingers deeper into her flesh. "Hmm? Tell me about that. How you've been waiting for me."

She locked gazes with him. His lips glistened from the kiss. "I was looking at you during the senator's speech."

"Noticed that, yeah. Were you thinking about what I'd do to you as soon as the sorry lot of them cleared the deck? Was it making you wet?"

"It was."

Dar dove for her shoulder and pretended to bite her, snarling, teeth gleaming and lips curled. He stopped a hair's breadth away so he could instead curl his tongue out and lick her skin. He rolled his eyes up at her. "Your skin tastes good. Almost as good as your cunt." He parted her sex through the fabric. His large hand felt hot and heavy.

The crude word added a definite point of thrill. "Why do you not make sure my 'cunt' still tastes as good as you claim?"

He fisted the toga around the slit on her hip and yanked sideways to reveal her belly and thighs. The fabric tore up to her waist with a dry sound. As if the ripped stitching had unleashed a wild beast, Dar dropped to his knees and clamped his mouth to her flesh. No amorous discovery or gentle teasing. He took exactly what he wanted. Opal propped a foot on the wall to offer him even more.

While he kept a hand gripped on her breast, he spread her wide for his mouth to claim. Tongue poker-straight and almost as hard, he teased her clitoris until she began to roll her hips against his face. Hmm. So good.

Opal closed her eyes. She willingly raised both hands and pressed them hard against the wall above her head, arched her pelvis to crush herself against Dar's mouth. When he bit and licked the skin of her lower belly, his bristly chin rubbed against her labia and triggered one massive frisson that rocked her head to toe. Near but still out of reach, pleasure teased her as would a half-remembered dream. When Dar pushed two fingers into her, it hit.

Her voice swelled from whimper to a long, deep-throated moan. "Yes...yes, yes, yes."

"That's all mine," he said against her inner thigh. Licked her clitoris, sucked on it. "All of that is mine."

"Yours," she breathed. "Take it. Take it now."

"Oh, you're not gonna get what you want that easy, Praetor."

Cool air replaced the hot and wet mouth. She opened her eyes to catch him standing and stepping back to the middle of the antechamber. "What are you doing?" Opal could not help the point of need from betraying her. He had left her so close.

"What? Not used to working for it?"

He closed his bear paw of a hand over his breastplate and in one rough tug, ripped it off him. A twitch of lust made her gasp. The tunic was molded to his chest with sweat. He fisted his buckle belt. The skirt went flying as well. Then the tunic. Thick muscles twitched under his tanned skin. She loved his chest. So wide and thick. With perfect shoulders to anchor her knees.

Opal brushed a lazy hand up over her breast. "Come back and make love to me."

Dar shook his head. "Nope. You didn't earn it."

"Earn it?" She peeled her back off the wall. One breast out of the toga and the other in, she stalked up to the insolent and irresistible man. "I must *earn* my companion's touch?"

"Oh, I got more than 'touch' on my mind, Praetor." He fisted himself. "If you want some of that, you're gonna have to earn it." There was nothing friendly or genial about his smile.

Opal had never been more aroused. She slowly circled him once. He followed with his gaze, even if he seemed to stare right in front. One rotation. Two. Three.

"You're waiting for an invitation, Praetor?"

She felt her nostrils dilate even as she pretended his words had no effect. The arrogant ass. Whom she loved more than anything. "I am waiting for an opening. A flaw."

"There's no 'flaw'. I can kick your ass any day of the week. You provide the time, the place and the ass, I'll provide the boot."

"Ha. Brave words from someone who has already lost."

Dar narrowed his eyes on her fourth rotation. "You want to test that theory right now, Praetor?"

"Do you...*gladiator*?"

To his credit, his back kick would have reached its mark had she had no formal training and slow reflexes. Thankfully, she had mastered the first and could thank good genes for the second. She deflected by spinning out of the way. He followed with a

backhand that she blocked, reversed. With her foot against his back, she sent him stumbling a step or two. That had been too easy –

She should have known. Pride in his eyes, Dar whirled around hard and fast, dipped his shoulder a split second before she realized he had tricked her. He charged. Arms wide to tackle her. Only at the last second was she able to jump over his low rush. Both hands on his shoulders, she used him as a gymnast would a vault horse and leaped over him. Legs wide, hands close.

“Is this all you can do?” she remarked. Blood boiled her veins. The culmination of this duel would be very, very satisfying. As had been the others preceding it.

“What can I say, my trainer sucked.”

Opal yanked her belt off, finished the toga by ripping it clean off under her arm and letting it fall at her feet. She stepped out of the red mound of cloth. Slowly to make sure he could see every detail, she ran her hand down over her belly. Fingers knowing where and how. Denuded her hard little pearl to his hungry gaze by pressing on either side.

“Perhaps I should finish myself what you started?”

A real gasp escaped her when Dar attacked again. Instead of a charge, he came at her on a rotation. Grabbed her wrist. She blocked, counterattacked. He parried, caught her second wrist.

Slowly, to show he had complete control over her, Dar raised her arms above her head in a wide V. Opal was practically suspended by the wrists. Pressure accumulated in her joints and tendons. Yet she would change nothing.

“What are you gonna do now, huh, Praetor? No one here to bail your ass out.”

A slow lick of her upper lip seemed to be the proverbial last drop. He back-walked her until she hit the wall. Gathered her wrists in one hand. She could have fought him off. Had she had the will. Which she did not.

“Do it,” she urged.

Forcing her thighs wider with his, he curled his spine. Muscles worked along his belly and thighs. She stared stubbornly into his intense black eyes as he prepared. Like a predator about to pounce. The split second of uncertainty before brilliant clarity. Glans hard and burning hot. He teased her with it. Pressed against her sex but did not sink in. She rolled her hips, tried to take him but he would not.

“Do it,” she repeated. “Do it. Take me.” Did not care how she sounded.

On a grunt, he pressed his cock against her. Pushed inside.

Fire accompanied his flesh as he drove it into her. Relentless. Retreat, reload, assault. Push. Claim. Thrust. The back of her head connected more than once against the marble wall. She did not care. He gripped her knee, hoisted it against his waist for a deeper penetration. Literally crushed her. Chest like a rock wall. Hair in a black cascade, undulating with each push. Liquid heat seeped down her thighs. She felt it swell. The pleasure. It throbbed around her opening, filled her lips with blood that

pulsated to the rhythm of her heart. Forced out of its hood by the brutal thrusts, her clitoris received the brunt of Dar's demanding love. He took her. Made her his. Opal wanted nothing less than every last shred of muscle from this man, wanted it and demanded it in a high-pitched and rising staccato.

"Your sweet, wet cunt," he growled in her ear. "That's it...take it into you..." His voice lowered and she no longer was able to understand his words although she could feel each exactly.

Skin squeaked against marble. Boots scraped the floor for purchase. Hands sweaty and slippery clung to a shoulder here, a knee there. Dar reached around her waist with his free hand and gripped her cheek. Bruising. Loving. He seemed to be fighting an inner demon that demanded the most brutal fucking yet listened to the whispered counsel of a gentle lover by pressing a tender kiss to her mouth.

Thighs pumped. Muscles burned. Sweat coated skin and dribbled from temples and chins. A collision. A duel. Then a series of arrhythmic clacks of skin against skin. Just as a veritable wave of ecstasy hit her with gale force power, Dar's culminating thrust lifted her heels off the floor. He growled a single word as he lost himself in her flesh.

"Opal!"

Tingling like fire ants coursed over her hands when he released them. With his two hands, he caressed her butt and thighs, her breasts, which he squeezed as he leaned back to look down into her face. More than lust showed in the fierce set of his mouth. He kissed her, gave her bottom lip a teasing suck then pulled out of her. Dar dribbled cum on both their thighs before he retreated to his discarded tunic. Opal slid down against the wall and lay on her side as he carefully wiped her thighs of his semen, did the same for himself. She watched him work, enjoyed the simple pleasure of looking at how his hands, though large and deadly, could be made to be the most precise tool, the tenderest extension of a man's love.

When he was done, he tossed the tunic behind him. Joining her lying on the floor, he backed into her facing outward. Reached back to let his hand rest over her hip. She was admiring his hand still when he took a deep breath that widened his shoulders. She thought he would say something yet nothing but a long sigh followed.

"Yes?" She had come to know his ways.

"I don't care what it makes of me, but I love you. Just like that."

She smiled.

"I know I'm losing my edge. Been around Vespasians too long."

"You are not a prisoner here, Dar. Well, no longer one."

He twisted his neck to look back at her. "Funny woman, har-har. Like I'm gonna go anywhere without you. You're stuck with me, Praetor. Live with it."

"I hope to 'live with it' for a very long time."

His smile touched her heart. Not lascivious, triumphant or menacing. Just an honest and friendly smile that softened his gaze and crinkled the thick tattoo around his eye.

"So do I, Opal." His smile widened as he rolled to face her.

"What?"

Leaning on his bent arm, he shrugged. The massive shoulder gleamed in the sunlight. "We're supposed to be enemies. And here we are. Playing doctor in the senate's closet. You a Vespasian and me from Hadi. That's just messed up."

"It is unexpected. But I knew as soon as I saw you that you were special."

"I'm special, am I?" He craned his neck so he could kiss her.

"More than special. Cherished. Loved."

"I'll take that." Dar lay on his back, cock proudly erect, hands crossed behind his head as he stared through the glass ceiling. Soon his eyes closed. His penis gradually relaxed after their momentous coupling. Until the next one. And the one after. She would never get enough of her Hadisian lover. His breathing deepened. The great Dar Skara had fallen asleep by her side.

Tears spilled from her eyes and into her ears as she copied his position. Side by side. Two fighters. Two hunters sleeping off the exhaustion of the hunt. Satiated for now.

Sunlight spilled into the room in bright golden beams. Beyond, a few twinkling shuttles passed by and temporarily blocked the sun.

The color reminded her of Sanguis' armor as it glimmered in the sunlight. Perhaps it was callous of her that she had felt no sorrow for the man's death. But the symbolic nature of his demise had reached even the most secluded Vespasian outpost. The great praetor, the most feared and connected politician had met his match and paid for his crimes. At the hands of a Hadisian. A former damnati destined to die, a slave. Her gladiator.

## About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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