

# A Circus of Devils

**Bloodborne Pathogens, Volume 0**

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A CIRCUS OF DEVILS

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# I



“THAT ONE.” THE CLOAKED man raised a hand the colour of a fish’s belly and pointed at her. “Tell me about her.”

“Beta?” Aulus – ‘little grandfather’ – coughed her name, and his cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red.

The woman known as Beta barely slowed her movements – thrust, twist, jab, chop – but she shifted her stance to better hear the two men, to watch them out of her left eye, the right being half swollen shut. As she glanced sideways, she could see the rim of the contusion on her left cheek out the corner of her eye.

“Her name’s Beta?” the stranger said. She could hear the arch in his eyebrow; he wasn’t the first to comment on the strange moniker. She didn’t care one way or the other.

Aulus, the man these barbarians called her master, shrugged, his pendulous stomach heaving with the motion. “Apparently, she was the second in the lot the Greek picked up, only speaks a few words in any civilized tongue. So we could never get a name out of her. Probably couldn’t pronounce it if we could.” He tittered at his own commentary.

*He’s nervous, Beta thought. Afraid of the stranger.*

The two men approached her, and she slowed for real this time, the cloud of dust she’d stirred up settling onto her sweaty skin, giving its rich brown a grey cast.

Beta lowered the trident, tines forward, while she flipped the sword in her hand so the point was back. She could attack either direction – if need or opportunity arose. Her opponent bristle beside her, and she forced herself into a relaxed stance in response. She couldn’t fathom why, but her fellow fighters – fellow prisoners – would defend Aulus.

The cloaked man walked around her, assessing. He placed his pale hands on her shoulders, his fingers icy despite the heat. The hairs on her neck stood on end as he traced the scars on her shoulder with a skeletal finger. Aulus' Adam's apple bobbed up and down, and he wiped his forehead. Bee flexed her muscled torso to shake off the crawling on her skin.

"I'd like to pit her against my man." The fish-belly man sniffed under the cloaks he wore as he glanced over his shoulder to where a rake sat cowering in the shade, guarded by a bull of a man.

"That thing?" Aulus said.

"Mmm. He's stronger than he looks. In fact, I think he can beat her."

"What do you want to bet?" Aulus said with a smirk, eyes narrowing as he looked back at Beta.

The pale man drew a purse from under his cloaks. Aulus' eyes shone as he licked his lips.

"All aureus," the pale man said, jangling the purse so the coins clinked together. Beta knew enough about their money and about Aulus and the state of his school to know it was a bet he couldn't refuse.



BETA STOOD IN THE SHADOWS of the portico, leaning an unbruised patch of arm against the wall and fiddling with the beads around her neck with her free hand, as she watched Aulus as he continued to show the cloaked figure around the school. She could barely tell it was a man, his movements were so masked by the heavy, black cloak he wore despite the blazing sun. Even in the shadows, beads of sweat trickled down her back and between her breasts. The only indication she had that there was actually a person under the cloak were the boot-ed feet and the occasional swivel of the hood as Aulus pointed out one thing or another. Otherwise, it could have been a spirit below the fab-

ric. Without preamble, the shadowed face turned her way, though she couldn't see it in the recesses of the hood.

Still her skin crawled at the inspection, and she cast her gaze around at the crumbling school. She glanced at the disintegrating walls and the worn stairs. At the cracks and chips she could use for handholds. At the gates that would have been easy to break out of if only she were left alone. She ran her fingers over the grimy brick, coated with years of uncleaned dank and must. She tensed at shuffling behind her but didn't turn.

"Good fight today." Titus leaned against the other wall. He was one of the few who'd never tried to cop a feel or get in her pants. Beta slowly pivoted towards him, wincing as an older wound, not from today's fight, grazed the brick. He glanced over her shoulder, as if to see the punishment that had been inflicted on her back. His eyes came back to her face. "Why do you keep trying to escape, when all it gets you is hurt?"

Beta didn't answer. Instead, she turned back to the practice yard, tracking the path Aulus and his guest took. Outside, the sun was just setting, casting a rim of gold around the lip of the walls. She tried to catch a glimpse of the foreigner before the light fled, but he was still swathed in his cloak. She watched the plumes of dust they kicked up as they walked. This sunbaked land was so parched, unlike her river-strewn homeland blanketed in a thousand shades of green. More than anything, she missed the smell of green. *Even more than the people?* a voice asked. She ignored the voice, instead glancing up at the sky, where stars were just starting to speckle the black; she could tell that the rain wasn't likely to come any time soon. Her eyes drifted to the western rim of the school wall where the sky was a lighter blue than the rest.

"You're a good fighter." Titus stood up, his greasy hair falling over his face as he shook his head. "Great, for a woman." Beta scowled sidelong. "Not just here to titillate," he added. Out the corner of her unswollen left eye, she watched him mirror her stance, looking out at

the school, glancing up at the moon before coming back to her. “Fuck, you’re probably the best of us. Good enough for a career in the big show.”

“I don’t want a career.” She stared at him for a minute before she turned and headed back towards the barracks. “I want freedom.”



AULUS’ PONDEROUS STOMACH pressed into Beta’s cheek as he loomed over her, his hand clasping at the leather thong he’d looped around her neck. Despite the fact that he’d demonstrated it before, Beta always forgot that he was an old soldier whose large hands and body still held the strength and agility gained from wielding a sword and living to tell the tale.

Not for the first time, Beta wondered how an old soldier who obviously knew more than a bit about both fighting and politics, ended up running a piddly school at the edges of the empire. But she never voiced that question; she realized that all it would gain her was a cuff to the head, and it would give Aulus more knowledge about her abilities – and her grasp of the barbarians’ language – than she cared to share.

Her knee grated on the sand of the training yard, and the laces of her sandals bit into her flesh as her leg kicked out, masked as an involuntary tic. But that just led to the lanyard tightening even more around her neck, threatening to cut off her breath. Her jaw tensed as she thought of ways she could get back at Aulus before she made her escape.

“I don’t know what runs through that uncultivated mind of yours, but you’d better not be plotting to run away again, or you’ll get to add to your collection of scars.” He ran a hand over ridges of healed flesh. Beta’s stomach roiled in response; Aulus had never tried to force himself on her, or any of the female fighters who’d passed through his

school, but he took an abnormal amount of pleasure in administering punishment on his gladiators, male and female.

Beta stayed silent, her eyes sliding to glance at the sword she'd been forced to drop when he snuck up behind her, perversely light on his feet, to slide the rope around her neck before pulling her hard to her hands and knees. He twisted the rope again, tightening it further. Her right hand scratched at the sand.

*If I can get a handful....* Her other hand grasped at the lanyard as she tried to get a gasp of air into her lungs. Stars appeared in her eyes. Finally, she felt Aulus shift, though the rope only loosened a hair's breadth.

"I saw you looking at our visitor today," he said. "If you think I'm a vicious bastard...." Aulus paused. "Let's just say he's not one to mess with. But winning fair and square, well, his warped sense of honour means he'll accept the outcome and won't seek revenge for losing his bet." He leaned forward again, his voice in her ear. "And you'd better win this match, or I will kill you myself. I don't care if you're my star." She smelled the rotten fish on his breath, hot and heavy on her neck. "No, no. I'll flay you alive and leave you for the vultures to pick at while you die."

Aulus let go of the rope, and Beta tore it from her neck, taking big gulping breaths. She glared at him, not bothering to hide the hatred in her eyes. Her fingers reached for the sword, but Aulus kicked it away, barely missing her fingers. His belly shook as he laughed. "That's right, let's stoke that fire."

Unconcerned, flanked by guards, who, if they glanced her way at all underneath their helmets, shifted their eyes away hastily, Aulus turned his back to her and walked away, leaving her with no doubt about what she needed to do in this afternoon's contest.

## II



THE CROWD CHANTED, and Beta pulled up taller, drawing her shoulders back, hardly sparing a glance for the man she'd just pummeled as he was dragged across the arena, leaving a trail of crimson. The sand had turned from tawny to coral as the sun started to set over the rim of the arena.

The bruise on her left cheek was still tender from yesterday's turn in the arena, despite having been victorious as always. Her right eye was no longer swollen shut but she could still see the rim of her cheek was more prominent than usual. Taking long, confident steps, she strode around the sand, raising her arms to encourage the cheering of the audience. Clenching her jaw to squelch the smile, she let her dark eyes travel across the faces of the people.

The skin on her torso tightened as the blood splattered across it began to dry in the unforgiving heat. Beta continued her victory lap. One hand thrust her trident into the air repeatedly, stoking the crowd; the other, sticky with congealing blood, grasped the net she wielded to great effect – she'd had lots of experience with nets, helping her brothers on the river when she was trying to shirk her own chores. She saw the satisfied smile spread across Aulus' face, as his hand stroked the front of his toga; she could almost see him counting his winnings. Sweat trickled down his face from under the ridiculous wig he insisted on wearing when he presided over the fights.

Beta scanned the assembled crowd, her eyes narrowed. "Next?"

A movement beside Aulus drew her eye. The cloaked man had been watching her all afternoon, but now he raised a pale hand and motioned to the shadowed archway.

A man stepped out. He bore no resemblance to the rake she'd seen earlier. She gasped in recognition – it was the guard. *Aulus must be livid.* She didn't look his way though, focusing her attention on her opponent. He was a good head shorter than her, but his torso was twice as broad. And it was solid muscle. So this was the cloaked man's fighter, the one Aulus would still expect her to beat. She spun her trident in her hand as she assessed him.

She'd seen him practicing down below...and seen the man he'd practiced on being dragged out bruised and bloodied. Doable. But she'd been fighting all afternoon, in the unforgiving sun; a few of her opponents had even been a challenge. While he was fresh. His head was bare, shaved bald, and his brow was heavy, shading his eyes.

He stepped into the arena, thick calves covered by metal greaves that offered a little protection, especially from the small tines of a trident. He began a slow circuit, keeping to the outside, spinning his sword in his right hand while his shield hung at his left. Beta tracked his movements with the business end of her trident as his heavy boots stirred up dust devils in the sand. She rocked back and forth, making sure she was still light on her feet and made circles with her shoulders. Her left leg ached from where it had been raked by a shield's edge. She shrugged her shoulders to shake it off, deciding to favour her right instead. At least until she'd gotten the measure of this man.

Beta walked to the edge of the sand and traded her net for a short sword, glancing over at Aulus, who looked at her with narrowed eyes, his cheeks splotched. Turning back to her opponent, she baited him. When she spoke, she annunciated clearly but kept her voice heavily accented – let him think she was a barbarian. “Is this how you win fights, walk in circles until your opponent dies of boredom?”

She sighed inside. She was tired and wanted this day to be over. Wanted to be back at the barracks, being bathed and massaged by Marcus. The thought of Marcus and his talented hands brought a smile to

her face. But that would have to wait if she wanted to turn this fight to her advantage. If she wanted to show Aulus that he didn't own her.

She glanced around the arena, letting her eyes pause on Aulus for a second as her gaze slid over him to the cloaked man. She'd heard whispers of Aulus' troubles. If she lost this fight, if he lost his sizable bet, the school would fold. She'd be free.

Beta caught movement out of the corner of her eye and realized she'd allowed herself to get distracted. She turned back to her opponent, still favouring her right leg, forcing her weight onto her injured left. A lesson from her first teacher, long since gone: pretend you're weak when you're strong, strong when you're weak. The man charged towards her, like a water buffalo at a predatory lion, surprisingly quick for his bulk. It forced Beta to dodge left, causing a twinge in her leg. She grit her teeth and continued the arc to dodge his attack. Turning back around to face him, she lowered into a fighting stance, rocking back and forth, working out the kink in her left quadriceps.

The man might be a mountain, but as he turned to her, she saw that he was already suffering from the effects of the heat and the sun, after his single charge. Sweat glistened on his torso and dripped down his face. Beta allowed herself a smile as she trailed the tip of her trident in the sand: he might have the mass of a bull, but she had the stamina of a horse.

Then she remembered that she wanted to lose this fight. With a shrug, she allowed the pain in her left leg to come back, letting it limp as she loped towards him. She saw the moment he noticed her weakness as a cruel smile played at his lips. With a sigh, she clenched her jaw, grinding her teeth together, and braced herself for what was coming. She ignored the chants of the crowd, she ignored Aulus, she ignored the pain in her leg. Instead, as she paced towards him, she focused on figuring out how she was going to lose.

He advanced towards her, nonchalantly this time, slewing his sword around in lazy figure eights. She watched his shield droop a frac-

tion of an inch, but that was enough of an opening for her short sword if she attacked. She noted the hiccough in his hips as he walked, making it easier for her to trip him with her trident. She spun around in a circle, sending her trident long and slow towards his ankles, giving him ample opportunity to leap over it. In the end, that was an opportunity he didn't need, waiting until the last second before he hopped over it into a tumbling roll, popping up that much closer to her. A blossom of pain exploded in her left shoulder and the wet of blood oozed onto her skin. *This bull has some moves after all.* The arcs of his blade that had seemed so lazy turned out to be much quicker than they appeared.

The hair rose on Beta's neck as she realized she might not have to *pretend* to lose this fight. Sweat glistened on her skin, stinging in the fresh cut and unhealed lacerations, while his torso heaved with big breaths. Her sword crashed on his shield, and his blade hit the tines of her trident. With the force of his mass behind the blow, it sent shock waves up her arm into her shoulder. She dodged around him, the pain in her leg forgotten as she looked for an opening: she wanted to take a fall without being hurt.

As she moved one way, he turned the other. Then she saw it. As she spun in the sand, she let her left leg slip out from under her just as his blade passed near her head, nicking her shoulder without doing any real damage. She landed on her back in the hot sand, a whoomph escaping her as the wind was knocked out of her lungs. She tried to keep hold of trident and sword just in case, but she fell with more force than she'd planned, and they clattered just out of reach.

Again, a shiver of fear passed through her as the tip of her opponent's sword pressed to her chest, and she looked up into his wild, almost inhuman eyes.



WITH HER BACK NOW ON the scorching sand, eyes skyward, Beta realized that the sun had finally set, not just disappeared below the walls of the arena. The circle of sky overhead was striped from a bruised purple to a deep blue to an angry orange. Torches were being lit around the arena. Her opponent looked to the cloaked man rather than Aulus. The man pulled his hood back and looked at her.

His pale skin, pulled taut over the sharp angles of his face, glowed in the torchlight, reminding her of the sun-bleached bones of an animal. His eyes, the colour of an icy winter sky, travelled over her from head to toe before coming back to look at her face. An almost smile pulled at his lips.

Tearing her gaze away from the man, she looked at Aulus. His face was red, his cheeks puffed out. She could see the veins in his forehead from where she lay. Sand gritted in her wounds.

Her opponent was still as marble, even his torso barely moved, as he waited for someone to pass judgment. She'd assumed Aulus wouldn't let her, his prized fighter, die for losing one fight. A shiver of doubt passed through her. Perhaps she'd misjudged the situation. Her hand strained towards the pommel of her sword, but her opponent's weight shifted, coming to rest a little more on the foot that pressed into her chest. She could almost feel the pommel at the tips of her fingers, but it remained resolutely out of reach.

The editor – the purported arbiter of who won and who lost, who lived and who died – held out his hand, thumb to the side, and glanced at Aulus. In that second, she knew what Aulus would do, from the set of his jaw, the narrowing of his beady eyes, the tightness of his lips. He would let her die to pay for him losing the fight, losing face and losing the bet. She took as deep a breath as the foot on her chest allowed – she'd rather have died after fighting to the end, but this would do. She was about to close her eyes when a movement drew her attention back to the two men. The now-uncloaked man placed a hand on Aulus'

shoulder and whispered something in his ear, all while keeping his eyes on her.

Aulus looked at the man, looked at her for a long minute, then turned to the editor and gave a small shake of his head. The editor turned his thumb upwards.

She lived. Beta released the breath she'd been holding. She survived another day, time to find another opportunity to escape servitude.

The unclouted man turned his gaze to her opponent and nodded his head. Her opponent dropped to a knee beside her, somehow keeping his sword a hair's breadth from her neck. He stared at her with a flat face and empty blue eyes. Then he shifted, offering a meaty hand to help her up. Beta looked at it with suspicion before finally grasping it. When she was up, the man's other arm wrapped around her neck, making it hard to breathe, and he dragged her into the archway. Some words echoed around the arena as the strongman pulled her into the depths of the tunnels. Beta twisted her torso and kicked out, but her boots slid on the gritty cobblestones. Eventually, they came to a room lit by warm torchlight. Her opponent dumped her in the middle, then stood by the entry, arms crossed.

Beta shifted into a crouch and glanced around. One way in, one way out. She visualized plowing into the man's solar plexus with her shoulder, mapping out the fight that followed. Whatever scenario she ran in her head ended badly for her. So she stayed crouched and bided her time. She thought about trying to get him talking, finding out what she'd gotten herself involved in – she should be dead, or at least bleeding out onto the sand of the arena – but whenever her eyes caught his, she saw an emptiness that quelled her curiosity.

And she didn't have long to wait. Soon, a whisper of movement snaked its way along the tunnel towards them. A shadow grew on the wall behind her jailer. The cloaked man, hood still down, entered carrying her trident, net and sword. He removed said cloak with barely a shrug of his shoulders, revealing doeskin breeches and a short, blue

tunic embroidered with silver serpents along the hem. The man was clearly wealthy, and clearly not Roman, given his garb. He handed his cloak and her weapons to the strongman, and Beta saw her opportunity: arms full, the man couldn't draw his sword.

Beta lunged forward from her crouch, putting all the force her long, toned legs could muster into her forward momentum. Which meant her throat hurt even more when the uncloaked man's hand closed around it, like a noose of iron, stopping her in her tracks.

"Hunh." Beta gasped, trying to get a breath in. His fingers were cold as they closed a little more tightly, pressing the beads of her necklace deeper into flesh.

"Is that any way to repay me for saving your life?" His voice was crisp like icy water, his accent cultivated to a Roman patrician despite also being a foreigner.

Beta's eyes slid sideways to look at the side of his face, half hidden by his straight, dark hair. He turned his face deliberately towards her.

"I'll let you go if you promise to be good." He quirked a black eyebrow at her.

Beta's eyes narrowed, but she gave a constrained jerk of her chin to signal assent. The man's fingers loosened.

Her feet touched the ground, and her shoulders slumped in relief. She pulled them back as she took a deep breath and brought a hand to rub her neck. It would be bruised tomorrow. She stepped away from the man, reassessing her limited options. Her stomach was queasy, her teeth on edge.

"My name is Kai. And I'm your new master."

Beta's head swivelled sharply to look at him. A worm of worry wriggled in her gut. Aulus was an evil she knew.

"Nothing to say?" He nodded at the bull, who handed him his cloak but kept her weapons. "This is Galo."

“Rooster?” Beta looked from him to the bull – rooster – and back. “I’m surprised Aulus agreed to sell me,” she said with perfect diction and no accent. “I’m his best fighter, after all.”

“And modest too.” His eyebrow arched, and the corner of his lips quirked. “Let’s say he agreed to stay solvent. Better to lose his best fighter than lose his school.”

“Can I collect my things?” Beta asked even though she had few things besides the weapons Galo held and the simple bead necklace from her sister that circled her neck – she never took it off, not even to fight. “Say goodbye?”

Kai stepped up to her. “If you play games with the devil, you lose.” He turned and walked out.

“I take that as a no then?” Using her own trident, Galo motioned for her to follow. “I guess that means I’ll miss my massage with Marcus.” Beta kept her eyes on the behemoth as she moved past him into the dark tunnel. Then she turned to Kai and tracked his silent steps as she followed him, a hiccough in her step as he went right, out into the deep night, instead of left. Outside the gate, a closed carriage made for long-distance travel waited.

“Where are we going?” she asked, her steps slowing.

“Over the sea, of course. To the very heart of the Empire.”

Beta swallowed, stopping, until she felt the points of her own trident prod her forward.



BETA RUBBED HER WRISTS as she walked beside the cart. The bull, Galo, had removed the bindings after she’d fallen for a third time, though he still hadn’t given her her weapons.

Her eyes alternated between boring into Galo where he walked up ahead and scanning the land around them. Galo was the cloaked one today, legs wrapped in thick grey breeches, torso covered by layers of

brown fabric, despite the heat and humidity. He looked like a rock, or like the bull she'd dubbed him. Not at all like a rooster, though the thought of him strutting about made her smile. The landscape had shifted over the course of the day from the dusty tan sand of Aulus' town to the dusty grey sand of the seaside. At least here, the scrub brush was greener and more frequent, though no less thorny. The air was more humid but tightened on her skin as it dried. The train travelled towards the sea, that much even landlocked Beta could tell. The foreigner hadn't lied. The scent of the air changed, became more astringent and saltier.

Of Kai, her new so-called master, she'd seen no sign since they'd set out before dawn, though she assumed he rode in the carriage given that Galo rarely stepped away from it.

Cresting the hill, Beta's stomach sunk, as if a deep pit had opened in her gut. Laid before them was the sea, full of monsters and malevolent spirits. Terrible and dark, a deep slate blue that swallowed the light, not the warm green of her childhood lake. This was the realm of capricious foreign gods. Beta shaded her eyes against the setting sun. Below them was a boat being loaded with all kinds of cargo, animal, vegetable and mineral. And human. Others like her, bought and bound.

Beta sighed. *Now or never.*

She started to hobble, favouring her left leg. She slowed, bent to rub her knee as if it ached, while keeping her eyes on Galo. The sun finally dipped below the horizon, blanketing the land in a dull twilight. She cast her eyes sideways, back to the ship one more time, then turned to flee into the darkening land, weapons or no. And ran right into Kai.

Whatever she was, wherever she was, Beta was a survivor. She couldn't name what she saw in the man's face and in the glint of his sunless eyes, but she turned around, back towards the ships below, pulling her shoulders back. She glanced at the cart; its closed curtains hadn't moved a whisper, but then her eyes had been on Galo.

Turning towards her destination, she saw that the sea, now sunless, had morphed into an expanse of volcanic glass ready to swallow her whole.

### III



BETA CRIED OUT AS HER bruised knees and scraped palms hit the cobblestone floor, coated in grit. This was better than face planting on the hard surface, but not by much. She careened onto her side and whimpered as the floor impacted her ribs. The barred door behind her slammed shut, while ahead of her spears of sunlight shot through a grated window, cutting through the darkness of whatever prison she'd been tossed into. She tried to turn over and look around, despite still being sun blind, but the movement sent a spasm of pain through her abdomen, causing her to cough. Speckles of blood spattered the stone.

"That's not good," Beta whispered through cracked lips. "By the gods, that man has rocks for fists."

"Galo?" a deep voice said.

Beta scurried backwards, away from the sound and towards the wall, wanting solid stone behind her instead of darkness. Despite ignoring the bruises along her leg, she didn't make it very far. Pain shocked the air from her lungs, and another coughing fit raked through her, causing her to spit up bloody flecks of saliva.

"I won't hurt you," the voice rumbled from the dark. Beta squinted, trying to make out the speaker beyond the shafts of sunlight. Gradually her eyes became adjusted to the darkness, which wasn't so dark after all, and she could just make out a shadow in the shape of a boulder against the opposite wall. Then the boulder moved. As it came forward, its legs moved into the light, two tree trunks made flesh. She'd never seen human legs that large, or that hairy. Or that crisscrossed with scars.

The tree trunks moved again, and Beta pressed back, wincing from the pain. Her hand went without volition to her left side, where she was

sure a rib had cracked. She licked her chapped lips as her eyelids blinked in slow motion. “Excuse me if I don’t believe you.” Her voice sounded flat and thin compared to the boulder’s reverberations.

“Not the first time someone’s doubted me.” A pelted torso came into view, round like a barrel. Here scars traversed the skin like lines on a map. Two trunks emerged from the torso, ending in paws the size of plates. One hand held a bowl, the other a cloth. He came to within a foot of her. She could have reached out and touched him...if she’d dared. His head came into the spears of light. She squinted through a swelling eye. His face was as scarred as the rest of him, maybe more so. It was hard to tell what lay under the neatly trimmed beard, but white lines crept out from the edges, while another streaked down the right side of his face, puckering the skin, bisecting his eyebrow and forking across his cheek like a bolt of lightning, before the tendrils disappeared under the beard. She winced just thinking about the wound that had caused that one. His hair, like the beard, was russet red, thick and well-kempt. He looked at her with glinting eyes and a smile made lopsided by another, older scar.

“If you’re done gaping, we should get you cleaned up,” he said, lifting the cloth and bowl slightly. He knelt beside her. “By tomorrow that eye will be swollen shut.” He reached out with the dampened cloth and dabbed at the bruised and broken skin. She shifted back then willed herself to stop as another spear of pain shot through her side as her back contacted with the wall. He would do what he would do; there was nowhere else for her to run. “And maybe see if we can bind your torso, keep those ribs in place.”



BETA’S RIGHT EYE OPENED a crack, letting in a smear of dusky orange light. She could no longer hear the moaning, like wind through a crevasse, nor the high screech that had woken her. Neither could she

hear the slip-slap of water on wood that had been a constant tune during the sea voyage, though her stomach still felt the bob and drop of the waves.

She blinked a few times, trying to clear the gunk from that eye and trying to coax the other one open, without luck. She lifted her left arm intending to do some gentle probing but stopped as an eye-watering pain pierced her side.

*Right, the Rooster used me to practice his punches.* Instead of testing her swollen eye, she lightly pressed her fingers to her side, then prodded a little more deeply. In the cruel light of day, the ribs didn't actually seem broken. But everything was bruised. Beta cast her mind back to the day before. At least she thought it was the day before. At some point she'd passed out after another spike of pain shot through her. It could have been a week ago for all she knew. She opened her right eye again and tried to suss out her situation, but that was the side towards the wall. She knew two things: first, her bladder was near to bursting but she hadn't peed her pants, so it likely was only last night that she'd been dumped unceremoniously in this cage; second, she was still wearing the clothes she'd come in with, grubby and bloody as they were. One of the last things she remembered was hairy hands carefully redressing her after binding her bruised torso.

*The bear.* Beta jerked up, a bolt of fear coursing through her system. She got halfway to seated on adrenalin before a lance of fire radiating from her left side stopped her short. She gasped, breathless, and flopped back. This just caused another shot of pain. She pressed her eyes – rather, her eye tightly shut. Without moving her body, she turned her head to look at the barred window, a little too high for her to see out of from her prone position on a lumpy cot. But she noted the path of the sun and guessed it was afternoon. She could hear grunting, and cursing, and the sound of metal on metal. At least those were sounds she was familiar with: somewhere nearby people were fighting.

She stared at the ceiling with her one good eye, watching a spider check its web as the sun crept along the far wall. Beta sighed. Her back ached in that spot, between shoulder blades and low back, that told her she'd lain around too long. More slowly this time, she tried to sit up, propping herself up on one elbow then the other, breathing her way through pulses of pain.

Swinging legs off the cot onto the dusty floor, she inched her way up, her right hand reaching out to the wall to prop herself up, her left pressing to her ribs. Sitting up, she took in her surroundings. The floor was still rocky, but had been swept of dust. Even the flecks of blood she'd coughed up were gone. It was the cleanest cage she'd been in, except for the cobwebs. Tangential to hers, another cot was pressed against the wall nearer the door. Between the door and it stood a trunk serving as a makeshift table, with a lantern and some pieces of wood strung on a cord sitting on top.

Seeing the pot under that cot, she felt around under her own. With fierce intention, careful leverage and a lot of wincing, she addressed her most pressing need. With a soft sigh of relief, she pulled her pants up bruised legs. Sliding the pot to the side, she shuffled into the stream of light, blinking her one good eye to adjust to the brightness. A handful of fighters were training in the circle of sunlight at the centre of the practice yard, sweat glistening over bronzed or burnt skin. There were men of all shapes and sizes – short and stocky, long and lanky, big and broad. But no women.

All presided over by Galo. Her nemesis. She could have beaten him. In hindsight, she should have trounced him. She'd thought by losing that fight, she could punish Aulus. Possibly cause the school to close, maybe find her freedom as things fell through the cracks. At least find death at someone else's hands. Instead, she was even further away from the home she wanted to return to, never mind that there was no place for a woman like her there.

As a wave of dizziness passed through her, she gripped the bars to help stay upright. She watched Galo as he watched the fighters. There was a keenness in his gaze that was surprising. Beta's eyes narrowed as more clanging echoed through the walls, followed by a bellowing roar that didn't come from any of the contestants in her field of view. There was more fighting going on than what she could see, and it sounded as if it was coming from below her feet, through what felt like solid stone. It reminded her of the mating rituals of the long-nosed, long-tusked elephants.

Behind her, a shadow shifted, followed by a breeze. She slid her eyes sideways but didn't turn around. She caught a whiff of soap and rosemary, covering a metallic tang.

"Why did they put me in here with you?" she asked.

A silence hung in the air, broken when the other cot creaked. "I was the least dangerous option."

She turned to face him at this, her eyebrow raised in doubt. He sat on the cot, a healing cut on his cheek, a bruise on his shin and his hair still damp from the baths. He seemed an inmate like her, a fighter, except his few possessions spoke of a higher place in the pecking order – a lanyard of delicately carved, wooden figures on the trunk beside his cot, tucked beside an oil lantern, and a finely wrought bronze torc around his neck. One of his large hands held a piece of fabric while in the other he had something small. It was the look of concentration on his face that made her realize he was mending his tunic, the needle lost in his large hands.

"There aren't any other women here?" She leaned back against the cool wall, arms across her chest, only wincing slightly at the thorn of pain in her side.

He gave a harsh laugh. "Yes, there are," he said, focusing on his next stitch before he glanced up at her. "Trust me, I'm a safer option."

Beta watched shadows move in the corridor beyond as other fighters returned to their cells. Somewhere a gate clanged. *Locking us in.* She

turned halfway, glancing out the window again, to see Galo roaming free, proud as you please, seeming more like his moniker. “Why is he out there rather than in here with us? He’s a fighter, like we are.”

The boulder followed her gaze to the window, then he continued with his stitches. “He’s a fighter. But not like us.” He tied off the thread, snapping it with his teeth before looking back at her, his blue eyes unreadable. “You’ll get your shot at getting out from behind these bars. But you just trade one prison for another.” He looked back at the window.

“What? That makes no sense.” She shifted her glare from Galo to the bear.

He opened his mouth as if to respond then snapped it shut. A movement at the door caught Beta’s attention. A waif of a girl stood there, her dark hair falling in oily strands, dressed in a ratty rag of a shift. She carried a tray in her hands and looked from the bear to Beta with large eyes. The bear watched the girl as she entered the cell.

“Food.” The girl lifted the tray a fraction of an inch. “To heal.” She shuffled over to Beta, hardly making a sound, and placed the tray at her feet in one seamless movement, then shifted back, somehow staying in a squat as she moved. Something about her reminded Beta of her youngest sister. A fluidity in movement, a hesitancy in expression, a delicacy in structure.

Beta squatted down herself and poked at the food. Beer. Bread. Greasy unidentifiable meat with random green flecks indicating some token vegetable. At least she hoped it was a vegetable. Either way, it didn’t look appetizing, but her stomach still growled in response to the pungent aroma. She glanced from the girl to her cellmate, whose face was once again flat and unreadable. With a piece of the bread, she scooped up a mouthful of the meat mélange. Bringing it to her nose, she sniffed it. Even though the girl reminded her of her sister, she still didn’t trust anyone in this place.

Then she sighed and shovelled the food into her mouth. *If they want me dead, they can just as easily slit my throat.* It tasted...foreign. Not bad. Just odd. As she chewed the tough meat and gristle, she thought she'd gotten used to these barbarians' tastes, and their penchant for foul sauce, but the food with Aulus had been different. Maybe being that much closer to her home, some of that seasoning had seeped into the cuisine. But her stomach rumbled, telling her it was better than nothing.

She took a sip of the weak beer and noticed the girl staring at her from where she was crouched with her bony limbs and her hollow cheeks. She held her plate out to the girl, indicating she could have some, even though her stomach grumbled that it hadn't had its fill. "It's good." She nodded at the girl. "Different, but good."

The girl smiled but shook her head, stringy, oily strands of hair falling over her face. Then the girl glanced at her cellmate, who still stayed silent and grim.

"No food for you?" Beta asked, arching an eyebrow, before shovelling the dregs into her stomach and washing it down with the last gulps of beer.

He shook his big head once. "No."

"She likes me better?"

As soon as Beta put the cup on the tray, the girl snatched the tray and started scurrying out of the room, the man's eyes tracking her movements.

"Wait!" Beta stood to go after the girl. "What's your name?"

The girl stopped, turned and looked at her with wide eyes but said nothing for a minute. Beta realized that she might not speak the tongue.

Then the girl spoke. "Marissa." After that, she fled the room, leaving Beta agape. She turned to say something to the bear, to find him staring at the empty doorway.

“You should be careful of that one,” he said, his eyes glancing over her face as he turned away. “My name’s Martel, by the way.” He put his mended tunic on his trunk. “And you’re Beta, my trainee,” he added without looking back.

## IV



ON HER HANDS AND KNEES, Beta spit grit out of her mouth along with bloody saliva. With a tentative finger she probed at her already bruised lip, now split again and embedded with sand. Behind her, Martel growled.

“Get up.”

She wanted to comply. Despite him being twice as wide and having three times her mass, she wanted to get up, to thrash him and repay him for all the scrapes and bruises from his so-called training. But her strained muscles and aching joints just didn’t want to cooperate, bruised and battered as they were.

Through some magic, she struggled up to kneeling. As he paced around to face her, she grasped at the hilt of her sword, but couldn’t pick it up. The world spun around her. She glanced at him, his usually neat hair wild, his eyes shining. The thought occurred to her that today might be the day she died, under a harsh and foreign sky. But at least she was outside.

A movement to her left caught her eye. Kai, swathed in black, stood in the shade, watching with his expression inscrutable.

A flicker of hope flared in her chest. It still amazed her that the will to live could burn so strong. But he’d put in all this effort to get her, surely he wouldn’t let her die so soon, in training nonetheless, not even in a fight. She sensed the bulk of Martel descend behind her as a blade pressed against her throat.

“Do you think they care?” he hissed in her ear. “We’re just dogs to them, that they can pit against each other for their entertainment. As long as your death is bloody, they’re fine with that.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“No, I’m the son of a sow.” He dropped the sword in the ground in front of her, kicking up dust. “Training’s over.” He stood and stepped back. “Go get cleaned up. Get that lip taken care of.”

“Again,” she said, bringing a finger to her mouth.

“As many times as it takes.” Martel strode towards the shaded portico in the opposite direction of Kai.

A caw echoed in her aching head. She glanced up, shading her eyes against the sun, to see a raven on the rim of the practice yard wall. Looking back at Kai, she saw his gaze had followed hers. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the bird. Then with a flourish of black cloth, he fled into the cool darkness.

Beta tried to get up but faltered. Breathing deeply, she mustered all her strength, then tried again. Finally, she managed to stand and stumble towards the baths, intending to find Valerian. He was no Marcus, but he still knew what to do with his hands. She smiled at the thought and winced as her lip split.

*Medic first. She sighed. Again.*



BETA SUCKED IN A SHARP breath as Livy, the younger medic, tended to her bruised cheek. His glance shifted from her cheek to her eyes for a second, then he returned to his task, the touch of his long fingers barely a whisper on her skin. Cicero, the other one, who usually just sat and watched in silence despite his jolly appearance, spoke this time.

“You need to stop letting him hit you.”

She glowered at him. “Thanks for the advice; I’ll take it under advisement.”

Livy put a mug in front of her face. “Drink this.”

She knew even before bringing it to her lips that it was the same drink they always gave her. It smelled like sour dog piss, and tasted worse, but she had to admit that it did seem to help.

She'd been seeing the medics every day since she'd arrived. First to check her general fitness, then after every training session with Martel. Livy made her think of an ant: skinny, bony limbs and a gentle touch. While Cicero reminded her of a pig, round and pink and wise.

A flutter of movement at the door caught her eye. The girl Marissa was watching her again. She'd barely said more than a word when she brought Beta her food and took the tray away again.

Beta looked at Livy. "We done?"

He glanced at Cicero, who gave a curt nod. Assuming that was a yes, she got up and went after the girl. But when she reached the chilly, dank corridor, she saw that torches had been lit but there was no sign of the girl. Hearing a rustling to her left, Beta looked up and shivered.

*Fucking spiders.* She swore they were bigger than the ones they had where she grew up. Beta turned away, thinking her cot, however lumpy and hard and pokey it was, sounded even more appealing than Valerian's hands right now. The torchlight flickered, casting long, undulating shadows along the walls. She heard the sound of dried leaves moving behind her again, and glanced over her shoulder, just to reassure herself the spider was still there. It wasn't. She cursed. Searching the shadows that looked like dancing demons, she huffed. Her bed was even more inviting: the spiders there were a normal size and kept a respectful distance. She turned towards her cell, and almost jumped out of her skin to see the girl standing there, her big eyes watching.

Marissa still reminded her of her sister, though somewhat less in the eerie light. "What are you doing skulking about?" Beta tried to form her battered lip into a half smile.

The girl peered at her for a second then took her hand. "I show you." It was a statement, not a question, though Beta had no idea what the girl wanted to show her.



WANDERING THROUGH CORRIDORS, going deeper down, into damp and mustiness, walls slimy with condensation, reminded Beta of a story one of the other gladiators had told her, of a monstrous creature living in an underground maze. A rumble reverberating through the stone walls punctuated that thought, though it sounded more like the snore of some hellhound than the roar of a monster.

She knew in her bones that without Marissa's help, she'd never find her way back to the surface. On the plus side, she'd die where it was cool. *I'll die being eaten alive by spiders*, she thought as more click-clack-crunch sounds travelled through the dark.

The girl was still reticent to speak, giving one- or two-word descriptions of the archways they passed, gated with metal bars or leading into darkened corridors.

"Barracks."

"Armoury."

"Library."

"Shrine."

"Stables." A beastly roar emanated from that one as they trudged past, once again bringing to mind the labyrinth of the story. Beta paused, but the girl clutched her hand tighter and urged her along.

But Beta froze, and her heart jumped out of her chest as a ghostly shape emerged from the dark doorway.

"What are you doing, Marissa?" Kai's normally silken tones were clipped. He held a cloth in his hands, wiping off something that looked like blood – wet and crimson – though his white tunic was spotless. Over his shoulder, Galo appeared.

*Beasts underground.* Beta eyed them as her muscles tensed.

"Tour. Like you asked."

"I told you to show her the way to the arena. To watch the early show." He opened and closed the fingers of the bloody hand, his joints

cracking. He inspected the hand before flicking his eyes to the girl. “Are you incapable of following simple orders?”

The girl shook her head, but said nothing, her eyes wide. Beta’s lips pressed together, then opened to make some comment about showing you’re strong by threatening little girls. Then the man’s gaze turned to her, his blue eyes flashing red in the torchlight. “I want to see if our new acquisition likes our games.” He gave her a feral smile. The girl’s fingers tightened around her hand again.

“Come.” The girl dragged her along the dim hall. Beta glanced back at Kai and Galo. Kai’s icy eyes stared at her, the feral smile still on his face. She suppressed a shiver as she turned away at another tug from the girl.

As they continued down another corridor, she could hear noises beyond the random scurrying of creatures that kept to the shadows, underneath the constant drip of water she couldn’t see. A roaring, rushing sound like far off waves in a storm, ebbing and flowing.

She ran her free hand along the damp wall and felt the reverberations. They came to a set of steep steps and the girl had to let go of her hand to navigate them. The stairs themselves were in darkness, the torches having petered out at the top, but Beta could see a bright light down below, flicking in and out like a giant moth flew in front of it.

The girl stopped at the bottom and turned to stare at her with big eyes and a small smile. Beta took the stairs carefully – they were as damp as the walls – and reached out with both hands to brace herself. She felt the roar before she heard the snarl and froze on the stairs. The girl beckoned her forward, watching her with her wide brown eyes, the corner of her mouth twitching as if she was unsure if she should smile or not. Beta felt compelled to do as she was bidden.

As she left the darkness of the stairway and entered the light, the girl reached her arms wide, and in a lull of the sound, she spoke.

“The Night Arena.”

Beta cast her gaze around at the spectacle the girl indicated with a sweep of her arm. She found her breath taken from her.

Tier upon tier of spectators crowded into rows of seating that disappeared into the darkness above. All colours, all castes, all creeds. Closer in people were dressed in robes more opulent than Beta had ever seen, the light from chandeliers of torches glinting off the jewel-encrusted fabrics. Even their slaves were garbed in finery richer than she'd ever seen, some linked to their owners with chains of gold and gems. As the tiers rose, the garments became more common, the colours more muted. But the crowd was no less rabid. All around her, faces contorted in blood lust and fury peered down upon the arena, so many faces they became lost in a blur of shadows. While she gazed up, the floor shook as some creature stomped and roared. The walls trembled, and a trickle of grit fell from above, some landing in her eyes, reminding her that all this was underground. Another roar, terrifyingly close, brought her attention back to the arena. Across the large expanse of sand, something slammed against the huge metal grates, the guard jamming spears through to drive whatever it was back. The crowd hushed for a second at the ferocity of the sound, then their roaring redoubled, drowning out the beast.

"Frightening, isn't it?" A deep voice rumbled beside her, barely heard over the roar of the crowd.

Beta glanced sideways at Martel, who'd appeared from nowhere. What was frightening was how silent such a big man could be, but she kept that to herself. "It's hard to say," she said instead. "Since I can't see it. Sometimes the biggest voices come from the weakest of creatures." Marissa's hand clutched at hers, trying to drag her away. Beta looked into the girl's face, the wide eyes flicking between her and Martel.

"What?" He looked at her with a furrowed brow before turning back at the arena. "Oh, no, not the beast. I mean the crowd." He nodded towards the tiers. "The vehemence of their rabid desire to witness

creature killing creature.” The crowd paused again at another howling roar from behind the grates.

“Oh.”

“Are you philosophizing again Martel?” another voice said from the shadows, its eses sinuous. Beta’s head swung as Kai stepped into the light. “It can be dangerous to think too much,” he continued, then shifted his attention from Martel to her.

“I’ve been watching you,” he said, and Beta shivered at the thought, but stayed silent, instead watching him in return. “I think I made a good investment.” He smiled, and his handsome face became frightening, like a hyena. The smile dropped away. “And I think you’re ready to fight here, in my arena.”

Beta felt Martel stiffen beside her. “No....” he started, then stopped, perhaps quelled by the stony expression on Kai’s face.

“Do you question my judgment? Remember what I said about thinking too much.”

“Sir.” Martel paused, his jaw working, then shook his head. “I would never question you. I just...I work with her every day. She’s barely competent.” Beta made to protest, but he talked over her. “I beat her soundly every time. And she takes so long to heal.”

Kai peered at him before flicking his gaze to her. She didn’t much like the look in his eyes. “That last can be rectified, if needed.”

“Sir....” Martel seemed about to protest again but fell silent at another resounding tremble.

Kai’s face pulled down into a frown, and he strode across the arena, muttering in a language Beta didn’t understand. The crowd fell silent, and there were no more roars from behind the grates. Eventually, she felt another tug at her hand, and the girl led her back to her cell. On the return journey, Beta tried to pay more attention to way markers – if she was going to escape, she needed to know her way out.

## V



THE FLOOR WAS CLEAN, with fresh sand laid down to soak up the previous evening's bloodletting. The torches were sparse and dim, so Beta could hardly see beyond the first few rows of spectators, and the people soon melted into shadow. Though she could sense a mass of seething humanity in the darkness, despite the hush that had descended when she was announced.

*A new fighter. Fresh blood.* Then her opponent stepped through the gates on the far side. Galo...the rooster with the body of a bull. There was a twittering through the shadows. *Evaluating my prospects, no doubt, weighing the odds.* But Beta could have beaten Galo the last time they faced off. She could do it again, if she wanted to.

Then the editor raised his hand, and the crowd went berserk, placing their bets before his arm cut through the air to signal the end of the betting and the start of the fight. Runners worked their way through the first few rows, the slap of their feet on the stairs lost to the roar.

Beta clutched and released her trident, spinning it in her hand. It had been given back to her before the fight and it felt good in her grip. Comfortable, like an old lover. Though they still hadn't given her net back, perhaps sensing the destruction she could wield with it. She cracked her neck and adjusted the sword at her back. She watched Galo play the crowd, arms raising to goad them on. He roared and pounded his chest with his shield arm, stepping close to a couple of tittering men, and smiling lasciviously. She watched as his left foot took more of his weight. He pumped his right hand in the air, thrusting his sword at the spectators. Beta squinted as his right shoulder sagged lower than the left. He continued to tour the arena, followed by his entourage, but

made no move to take any of the weapons they carried as the editor counted down.

Beta checked the trick catch on the dagger strapped to her calf – easy to access, difficult to steal – then picked up the small shield she'd been using from where it rested in the dust, dinged from its many encounters with swords and hard heads.

The editor's count continued. There was a murmur as Kai stepped into his box, which provided the best view of the fighters. She noted the small jerk of his head towards the editor.

Beta stepped into the arena, favouring her left leg instead of her aching right, ignoring the pain in her shoulder as she hefted the shield. Her steps silent, she started to walk in a long arc around the outside, keeping her eyes on her opponent, while he continued to work the crowd. The spectators went quiet as she prowled; the change in his audience caused Galo to notice and turn towards her, his eyes narrowing. He sneered, causing the scar along the left side of his face to pucker, then his gaze shifted to look over her shoulder. Beta heard what had drawn his attention and glanced behind her. A handful of fighters poured out of the gates, armed with an assortment of well-used weapons, many of which Beta had never seen before.

Acid burned in her gut, and she glared at Galo, fire in her eyes. His expression gave her pause. From the scowl on his face, it looked like he was none too happy about the turn of events either, but at a glance at Kai, he stepped back, letting the other fighters come forward with the editor. Beta shifted her glare to Kai and was rewarded with a small lift at the corner of his lips. Marissa sat beside him, with eyes shining like she'd been drugged.

Then the editor reached the end of his count, slicing his hand downward through the stuffy air like a knife, and Beta had to turn back to her opponent...her opponents.

Her shield vibrated, her arm along with it, as a short sword made contact. The man with the goat's horns on his helmet. He even moved

like a goat, capering in and out of her reach. But he only seemed capable of back-and-forth motion, no bobbing or weaving. A dagger pricked her arm. She turned to glare at the owner, and had lots of time to duck as a fist came towards her head. She almost reached out then to break the wrist that held the dagger, but she wanted to make sure she had a good sense of all the fighters surrounding her.

Glancing to her right, she took note of the woman with brown skin, though not as dark a brown as Beta's own. The woman stood back, possibly letting the other fighters wear Beta down. Certainly, judging by her outfit of tight belt coupled with diaphanous fabric, she was here to titillate, not to fight.

*If only she knew I'll be done here in a tic, she might decide to get it over with.* Beta slammed her shield into Dagger's nose as he came for another jab. He let out a squeal that sounded more porcine than human before dropping like a sack of clay. Goat capered back and forth, and Beta longed for her net. She could take his feet out from under him in a second. Instead, she used the next best thing – her trident. She swung it in a low arc at his legs. He leapt over the shank, not entirely unexpected, which was why Beta had pulled it back towards her so she could drive the tines into his belly. He looked down at the sharp points as if not quite comprehending that it was his blood seeping out around them. Galo came and hauled him away, accompanied by booing from a crowd that hadn't gotten the show it had paid for.

That left only the woman. Beta stood straight and turned towards her. A heel contacted with her jaw and she staggered back. Rubbing her face with the hand that held the shield she glared at the woman, who stood wide-legged, rocking from heel to heel. Beta adjusted her shield and spun the trident shaft in her hand again, preparing to take the woman down. The woman pressed her advantage and came in for a blow, spinning in a circle as she danced towards Beta, her braid flinging out off her back at the movement. The woman had no weapons in her hands, but wicked looking circlets made up her belt. Beta had to ac-

cept that she might not be there just for titillation after all. Still, she had a few lessons to learn, like don't wear a long braid hanging down your back in the arena. Beta grabbed the queue and pulled back as hard as she could, coming to one knee on the sand. The woman followed her down, landing hard on her back, kicking up a cloud of sand. Her head hit last, and Beta could see the stunned look in her eyes.

Beta could hear the crowd booing over the rush of blood and adrenalin. They were upset that she hadn't given them a better show. Though some of them would be happy: the few that had bet the long odds on her. But if they were, they were quiet about it. Maybe they had wanted a show even more than they wanted the money. The woman had gotten up again, from where Beta had sent her sprawling on the dusty floor, though her stance was wobbly. Beta walked a slow circuit around her, dragging the tip of her trident through the sand. Then she realized that the crowd had quieted again, even though she wasn't giving any more of a show. She glanced up, and saw Kai striding across the sand towards her, weaponless, trailed by Marissa. Beta's eyes narrowed as she mentally tracked the threads of possibility. If she cut him in two, she'd surely die, but so would he. Then the crowd would get their show, and she wasn't sure she wanted to give them that. With a flick of her wrist, she spun the shaft of the trident in her hand as she watched his approach, trying to find a weakness in his stance. She'd barely got that thought out when, in a blink, he was behind her, his lips close to her ear. Beta shook her head, angry at herself for getting distracted by her own thoughts. The girl stared her with rapt attention in her big eyes.

"Why do you try my patience?" he hissed. Beta stayed silent, but kept her muscles taut, her tendons ready for action. "I know you can fight better than this." He stepped out beside her, moving slowly, within range of her weapons if she chose to act. With deliberate movements, he stepped behind Marissa, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. Beta watched as his fingers slid up, loosely circling her neck, and a queasiness spread through her stomach, oozing into her limbs. "Do you

know what happens when someone displeases me?” He glanced down at the girl’s head, while the girl just grinned at Beta, exposing teeth and scrunching her eyes. His hands started to come together, closing their noose, and Beta shook her head, her grip on her trident tightening as her muscles tensed. He dropped his hands to Marissa’s shoulders again. “Don’t make me spell it out for you.” Glancing over her shoulder, he gave a small, sharp nod then walked away, the girl trailing him. Beta looked over her shoulder to see who Kai had been communicating with. Galo leered at her, a nasty smile distorting his broad face.

Beta squared her shoulders as she watched Kai walk back to his box, Marissa’s small hand in his, an avuncular smile on his face as he peered down at her as she spoke. Beta hefted her shield and threw her trident aside, pulling the sword from her back instead as she turned to face Galo. When he crossed the space between them and slammed a fist into her side in the blink of an eye, she realized she’d misjudged the man.



“GET UP,” A ROUGH VOICE said. Beta groaned as her cot was jostled. She wanted to turn to the wall, ignore her tormentor, but everything hurt too much. She opened her eyes a crack – noting they weren’t swollen shut – and caught a blurry glimpse of Martel looming over her.

“Why? It’s not like I can fight.” Her words slurred over her bottom lip – definitely still swollen from her combat with Galo. She rubbed the crusty sleep from the corner of her eyes.

“Why not? Nothing’s broken.”

She glanced over to see if he was joking, but he’d turned away. Then she remembered that he didn’t joke. She considered defying him, but knew he’d just be back, maybe with a bucket of cold water next time. With a sigh, she rolled over onto her side, eliciting a groan from depths she didn’t know she possessed. Gingerly, she propped herself up on an

elbow then swung one leg at a time over the side of the cot, gritting her teeth against the tug of scar tissue on muscle. Although it seemed like the fight had been yesterday, her healing wounds told her otherwise, though she didn't remember anything in between.

"How long's it been?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Since Galo almost killed me." Her scoff turned to a phlegmy cough.

"There was never any risk of that."

"What do you mean?" Beta's face flushed with anger. "He drove a dagger into my torso. It's a miracle he didn't nick anything vital." Her ragged breath caught in her throat, causing her to cough again which led to a spasm of pain along her back.

"If Kai wanted you dead, you'd be dead." Martel scratched his fingers through his hair, taming sleep-rumpled curls. "He didn't, so you live." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Getting up?"

Beta graced him with a grimace, but bit back the words she wanted to say. Instead she repeated her question. "How long has it been? I've healed enough that the scabs only add to the pain."

"It was just last night."

Beta spun her head to look at him, which caused another bolt of pain. "That's impossible. People don't heal that quickly."

"The medics are magic-workers." Martel shrugged. "Getting up or do I have to get the water?"

"Huh." Beta pushed herself off the cot, teetering a bit as her head spun. But her legs were steady, for all the aches and bruises. "I'm working on it."

"Best way to heal is to get moving again." He stood at the open door to the cell, just as Marissa appeared with some breakfast, a fresh bruise on her cheek. "See you in 15 minutes in the practice yard."

With that, he left. The girl put the tray of mash on the floor but wouldn't engage in conversation. With a sigh, Beta shovelled down breakfast then dressed.



BETA TRIED TO RAISE her arm to block out the blazing sun, but every part of her hurt. Martel waited in the centre of the fighting pitch, with his hands hanging over the staff he had draped across the nape of his neck. She grabbed a wooden sword from the pile.

“You won't need that.” His voice rumbled as he shifted the staff off his shoulders.

Beta froze, arm still reaching, sword in hand. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice flat, not rising in a question. The wooden sword thunked against the others as she dropped it back on the pile. With eyes narrowed and head cocked to the side, she started towards him. “I thought we were training.”

“We are. But it's clear from your fight with Galo that I've been remiss in your education.” He tossed the staff aside. “Today we fight hand-to-hand.”

“You're fucking kidding me, right?” Beta's mouth hung open and her nostrils flared as she processed the possible scenarios. They all ended up with her covered in sand and even more bruises.

Martel lowered his large bulk into a crouch and rocked from one foot to the other. “I promise not to hit you.” He waggled his eyebrows and shuffled sideways.

Beta scowled but stepped towards him, her movements cautious and stiff. As she got nearer, she mimicked his stance even though her grumpy joints protested and her muscles howled. She lifted her leg into a weak kick, which he easily caught between bicep and torso. He let it go and went back to circling her. She followed his lead, orbiting a central point between them.

“It seems you’ve forgotten the basics. You’re supposed to try and hit me,” he said, making a lazy jab towards her but not making contact.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to hit me,” Beta said as she shifted, admitting to herself that her muscles were less sore and her joints more fluid for the movement.

“And did I?”

Still wary of his promise, she eyed his loose fists as he continued to bob and weave. She shifted, preparing for a front kick. A fraction of a second later, she felt his foot sweep her standing leg out from under her. As she landed on her left side, sand ground into the unhealed abrasions on her thigh from last night’s fight. She jerked her head towards Martel and growled.

A smile spread across his face, half hidden by his full beard. But she could still tell when his upper lip turned to a sneer as he crouched lower, arms wide, as if he were inviting her to jump on him. Beta kept her growl inside this time, letting it build in her diaphragm as she coiled her muscles. She launched herself at him, with no backup plan. His mouth went wide as she barreled into his chest and bowled him over, letting out the growl in a roar.

“Good,” he said, getting up and dusting himself off. “Use that anger. Follow it to its source and channel it.” He made a sound, half snarl, half bark, as he jerked his chin towards the entrance that led to the underground arena. “Do you think they care if you’re bruised and sore, dead even? As long as you give them a good fight before giving them an entertaining death.” He snapped his jaw shut and stood up straight as a form emerged from the darkness.

*Marissa.* Martel just stared at the girl. Beta expected her to come into the arena. Instead she crouched down in the shadows in the entryway, arms around her bony knees.

“What are you doing here?” Martel said, more a statement than a question, his voice gruff.

“Just watching,” the girl said, with a shrug of her shoulders, stringy hair falling over her face.

He strode over to pick up his staff, coming back to lower into a half-ready stance, shifting from foot to foot. He kept glancing at the girl, his eyebrows furrowed and his lips pressed together. “Why don’t you scurry back into the darkness then?”

“No,” Beta snapped at him. “She should be out in the sun, playing, running...” She searched her memory for some other childhood activity. “Picking berries.”

Martel looked at her, his expression guarded. “Not that one.” His eyes slid sideways to look at the girl again before returning his attention to Beta. “Training’s over for today.”

Beta scowled at him, then walked away without comment.

“Remember what I said,” he said.

She glanced back, a question on her face. “Which part? You talk so much for a fighter.” She walked over to the girl, who put her cold hand in Beta’s sweaty one.

“Come.” The girl tugged her towards the dim tunnels.

Beta hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t want to explore up here?” She made a wave of her hand. “Play in the sun.”

The girl’s wide eyes went a fraction wider. She shook her head. “It’s cooler down here.” She tugged again, and Beta followed.



GRUNTS AND SNORES INTERJECTED by sharp cries echoed through the narrow passages. It reminded her of animals rutting. This time, Beta also picked up a sharp tang when she breathed in the dank air. Marissa had led her along a new set of corridors that twisted and turned, the girl being unusually animated and verbose as she told Beta about the rooms they passed and the people who lived behind the closed doors. They’d gone down a few flights of narrow stairs and now

stood at a junction. Turn left, turn right or descend the staircase in front of them, one so narrow and low that Beta was sure she'd have to crouch her way down. The dark and damp crept in around her, and she shivered from the chill. The girl had become quiet as she peered left and right before bringing her gaze back to the stairs. Beta's shoulders sank. She knew which direction Marissa would choose. She debated not following her, but the shadows loomed large here, and the girl might need protection from the hideous spiders that clung to the dark corners.

The girl indeed started down the staircase. Beta sighed and followed, almost slipping on the damp stone. At the bottom, they turned another corner and the torches on the wall, already sparse, disappeared completely. Beta glanced at the girl who peered at her with avid eyes. She picked up the last torch from its bracket and beckoned Beta to follow without saying a word.

A tick-tick-tap signaled a drip to her left. A rustle, like the scurry of a hundred feet, whispered out of the darkness ahead. Behind them, something clanged, like a door to a dungeon closing. For a minute, Beta was faced with the horrifying thought of being locked down here.

Then that was replaced by a different fear as a ghost appeared in the corridor in front of them. She gasped, a short, sharp intake of breath as her heart rate spiked.

The creature took another step towards them, morphing into Kai. A scowl was imprinted on his face, like a mask in the theatre.

He glanced at Beta, then turned his frown back to Marissa. "What are you doing down here?" he asked, swiping the torch away from the girl with one hand, while grabbing her wrist tightly with the other.

Marissa gasped, and Beta stood straighter, taking a step towards Kai as some protective instinct kicked in.

He just stared at her blankly then pushed his way past, pulling Marissa after him. "You know this is off limits. And to bring a stranger down here...it's inexcusable."

Beta stopped, indignant, her mouth open to say something. But he strode back the way they'd come before she had a chance. "Are you coming, or do you want to be left down here?" he said, not turning to look at her.

Beta hurried after them, away from the rustling she heard over her shoulder.



BACK IN HER CELL, BETA sat patiently as Marissa inspected the bruises from her training session with Martel. The rough calluses on the girl's long, spidery fingers rasped over her skin and prodded and the patches of purple, green and yellow, all under Kai's watchful eye. His icy appraisal moved slowly from the girl to her, maybe sensing her watching him, but there was nothing lazy or lackadaisical about his gaze. There was an iron focus as he stared at her. Her skin crawled as his gaze travelled over her limbs, from head to toe, before shifting back to the girl again.

Beta opened her mouth, but not knowing what she wanted to say, she snapped it shut again. She peered at Marissa as well; the girl's tongue was between her teeth as she poked gently at another of Beta's bruises. Her eyes were large, unfocused, as if she was looking at something not there. She came to an abrasion that still seeped blood, and her fingers grasped Beta's arm, a gasp coming from her now parted lips. Beta pulled her arm away, and Marissa's head jerked towards her, eyes wide, the pupils large. Beta shifted away, turning to glare at Kai.

He cleared his throat, and the girl let go of Beta's arm and looked at him, her eyes focusing again. She stepped behind Kai, who turned his attention back to Beta. "You'll fight tonight," he said.

"But..." Beta looked at the wound on her arm, the bruises on her legs. She rolled her shoulders and felt the stiffness travel down her back. A shuffle in the corridor stopped her, and a shadow filled the doorway.

*Martel.* He stopped short, his bulk blocking the entry as he glanced around their small cell, overfull with bodies. He said nothing as he went over to his cot and started dropping his things, turning his back on them.

“You fight tonight,” Kai repeated, and Beta noticed Martel stiffen. Then Kai left, beckoning to the girl as he did. “Come.”

Martel barely turned his head to watch them go.

“Don’t worry,” Beta said. “He means me.”

A pause hung in the air, but eventually he responded without looking at her. “I know.”

## VI



BETA STUMBLED AS SHE tried to dodge another one of Galo's lazy jabs inside her weakening guard. He was being slow and methodical as he wore her down, so she was able to catch herself and almost evade the blade, but she still felt the sting of metal drawing blood on her thigh. The crowd roared a counter-melody to the blood rushing through her ears.

She'd worked hard to wear down Galo, to get inside his guard, and had managed to make contact a few times, even drawing blood. Though the cuts mustn't have been deep since she saw no blood now – he almost looked better than when the fight had started. His skin flushed with vigour and there was barely a bead of sweat on his forehead. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him, while wiping sweat out of her own eyes with the back of her sword hand, her trident having been lost a few parries ago. Luckily Martel had come to her rescue, throwing her a blade that glinted pale grey in the torchlight. She'd rather he'd passed her the trident, which had landed near his feet. But she'd quickly been pulled back to the fight by Galo's feral snarl, a flutter passing through her stomach at the glower he shot at Martel. She barely heard her tutor's advice: *Go low*.

Now, Beta struggled to keep focused on her opponent, to listen for the hitches in his breathing, to watch for the subtle shifts in stance that would betray some weakness, some extra effort he was putting in to hide that weakness. But the roar of the crowd was deafening, and the glint of their gems blinding. Their rabid faces, made monstrous by the flickering torchlight, distracted her.

She drew her attention back to Galo once more. But she found no weakness as she tried to heft the shield again with her aching shoulder and swing the sword with her leaden arm. No weakness except the sneer on his face. She squinted at him: that might be weakness enough.

Beta tried to lift the sword again. *The muscles in the shoulder burn*, she told herself.

Somehow, she got a low strike in, weak and hardly touching his shin. But a line of blood rose, and he howled. Beta stepped back. *Legs leaden, refusing to listen*, her inner voice said.

She tried to dodge out of the way of his next blow. *Off balance and unprepared*.

She went down, catching herself just before her knee slammed into the sand. *Shortness of breath, shoulders slumping*. She sensed him take a step back rather than come in for the killing blow. Playing with her. Taunting her. Gloating.

*A shooting pain in the right hip*. She pushed herself into a crouch and spun around, cutting her shield through the air in an arc that displayed a fluidity and gracefulness she was surprised she possessed at that moment.

The shield slammed into his calves, knocking them out from under him and sending needling reverberations up her arm, which she forced herself to ignore. He fell back, and Beta was on him in a heartbeat. He was stunned, just for a second, the wind knocked out of him.

The one rule she'd yet to see disproven: the bigger they are, the harder they fall. She'd learned that from the old man in the village, the one who'd taken pity on the girl who loved to watch the boys fight. The one who saw that it wasn't the boys she was watching, but the fighting, mimicking their movements in the shadows. He'd also taught her that sometimes, just sometimes, it works to show your enemies what they expect to see. Give them the weakness they think you have. Then use what they see against them.

Beta pressed the tip of her sword into Galo's throat, blood beading up. The clang echoing through the arena, signalling a stop, was faint under the blood rush in her ears. As the clang petered out, some part of her realized the arena had gone unnaturally silent. But she stayed focused on Galo, and his taunting and terrorizing. She leaned a fraction of an inch forward, her blade calling out for blood. The clang sounded again. She shifted her head slightly, bringing the editor into the corner of her vision, not moving the sword. She saw him glance from her to Kai, and she followed his look.

Kai stared at her, his eyes narrowing as he looked her over. Evading being caught by his gaze, her eyes slid sideways, to the two new people who shared the box with him. On one side sat a man with hair the colour of midnight and skin the colour of sand. A scowl seemed permanently etched on his face, and his black eyes glared at the arena. On Kai's other side was a woman with hair of fire, skin like the moon and eyes of ice. She clutched at Kai's hand as she watched the fight, hunger written on the planes of her face. At some imperceptible signal from Kai, the editor slowly lifted his hand and prepared to indicate life or death for Galo. *Thumb up.*

*Life.* Beta's nostrils flared. She didn't move away from him. Then there was a growl from Galo, and he bucked her off, dumping her in the sand as he grabbed his sword. He charged at her.

"Stop." Kai's voice was even, but it filled the space and sent a chill across her sweaty skin, even though it wasn't directed at her. Galo froze, as if ensorcelled. Beta looked from him to Kai, who now strode towards them, his face white with anger. She quailed.

He peered down at her when he came to stand beside them. "You lost me a lot of money today." He glanced at Galo, who'd knelt before him. "I expected my prize fighter to win easily." Kai placed his hand under Galo's chin, then calmly started digging his fingernails into the skin, forcing him to look up at an awkward angle. His face showed more fear than Beta had ever seen on it, and she smiled at that. Then Kai let go

and shifted towards her. “Not be taken down by some guttersnipe.” She scuttled back, trying to get out of arms’ reach as he crouched down.

“I’m sorry?” She hated how weak her voice sounded.

Kai graced her with a wicked smile that sent ice right into her bones. “Don’t be sorry. You showed me what a good investment you were.”



EYES CLOSED, FLASHES of the fight replayed in Beta’s mind as she scrubbed sand and sweat and blood from her skin. She was alone, left to clean herself since Valerian was nowhere to be found despite their mutually beneficial relationship. In fact, the baths were entirely empty. Beta was fine with that. She sighed, a full, heavy sound. For once, she didn’t want company at the moment. She was still trying to figure out the ramifications of tonight’s win.

A sound, barely a hiccough in the patter of water, caught her attention. She opened her eyes and scanned the dimly lit room, but there was nothing to see. A shadow loomed briefly in the corner, distorted and distended. A click-clack loud enough to be heard over the drip of water helped her determine the source. *Goddamned spiders. They’re everywhere.*

Beta took a sponge from the bucket in front of her and rinsed the last of the soap away, thinking the only thing worse than encountering one of the hairy beasts in the corridor was meeting one in the baths when she was naked. She stilled, sensing the presence behind her. Even without looking, she knew who it was, just by the scent of him, still unwashed after their battle in the arena.

“Galo.” She didn’t turn, not yet, instead aligning her muscles for fight or flight – she hadn’t decided on her best option yet. She knew what to expect. Rape, the usual tactic to bring a woman down. Other men had tried it with her before, when they felt she needed to be

knocked down or thought it would be a quick step up. Or wanted to punish her for being better, stronger, faster than them. They'd all realized soon enough the fault in their plans. She cast her gaze around for a weapon to use and frowned. The only thing at hand was the water bucket. Still she made a move to swing it around at his head, but this time her sore muscles were too slow, and he had his arm around her neck, dragging her back, before she had a chance. He definitely had more speed than she'd credited him with, given his bulk.

She kicked out but couldn't get purchase on the slick floor, her wet feet sliding on the soapy stone, and she found herself on her back before she knew it, a knife to her throat. Still she kicked, trying to get a good blow in. But he sat himself on top of her, using his weight to hold her down as he grabbed one of her hands in a meaty fist. He ignored the attempts at harm from her other hand as he wrenched her head sideways, pressing her cheek to the wet stone. Beta's eyebrows drew together. He was making no move to divest his clothes, no move to separate her legs.

"What...?" She torqued her head, trying to look at the face he brought close to her neck. She heard a blade slide from its sheath. "Did Kai send you to punish me?"

His harsh, barking laugh cut her off, and he pressed harder on her head, grinding her cheek into the stone floor before letting her turn slightly so she could see him. "This is *my* punishment. For thinking you can best me, for taking me down in his eyes."

Beta sighed then graced him with her best sneer. "You think death is punishment? Huh, Death and I are old friends. We talk on a daily basis."

He scoffed. "This isn't death. It's life eternal."

Beta's eyes widened as his face warped, the canines seeming to lengthen as he snarled. Then she found her cheek pressed to the floor again, just as a searing pain shot from her neck, down her torso and all the way to the tips of her toes.

She had just a moment to realize that something was very, very wrong before she spasmed and the world went dark.



BETA BLINKED, TRYING to push back the darkness. Something wet and warm pulsed onto her neck, in time with the throbbing of the wound. *The wound.* She'd been hurt. No, attacked...by Galo.

Despite what Galo had said, Beta was sure she was dying. And she found she was okay with that. She sighed, trying to brush away the pain the still seeped from the wound, oozing through her body. It was actually peaceful in the baths, with the drip-drop of water from the ceiling creating a kind of music, like the caves back home.

*Peaceful.* Except for the random twitches and convulsions that coursed through her, and the slow trickle of blood from the wound in her neck.

The stone beneath her cheek vibrated. It felt like a distant pack of stampeding wildebeests turning on the grasslands. Far away she heard her name. She sighed. *Can't I just be left to die in peace?*

Then gentle hands wiped away the blood from her neck. She heard a soft word in a language she didn't understand, but somehow knew it was a curse. The world started to fade. She convulsed once again, her back arching. When she collapsed back on the floor, strong arms picked her up. Then the darkness descended again.

## VII



BETA WAS STILL FEVERISH when she was dragged out of her cot the next evening, after spending a day being wrung out by convulsions and contractions, fevers and chills. A weak protest that she needed to get dressed formed in her mind, but as her head lolled forward, she saw that she was clothed. The side of her neck throbbed, her stomach heaved, and her mouth was dry. The sunset hue of her cell blurred into torch-lit corridors.

She stumbled and strong arms caught her, gentle hands lifting her elbows and helping her to her feet again, along with a smell of soap and rosemary.

She shook her head, trying to clear it, but that just caused her world to tilt. Stopping with her hand on the cool rock wall, she breathed deeply. The man in front of her, hair covering most of his skin, grunted something she didn't understand. But she got the gist. She was expected to follow. Quickly.

Now that she'd taken in a few lungfuls of musty air, and with the cool of the underground corridor settling on her shoulders, she realized where they were going. She was being taken down to the arena again though somehow she knew it was later than the usual show, despite the permanent night. She shuffled back, struggling against the hands that grabbed her arms, but she had no energy and little will. They couldn't really expect her to fight in this condition. *Unless they expect me to die. Well, if they kill me, at least it'll all be over.* She stopped struggling just as a gruff voice rumbled along the passage.

"Leave her be."

*Martel.* Of course he would be there, dogging her steps. Beta started forward again, and shortly they came to the top of the final flight of stairs. She breathed deeply before heading down the stairs and into the halo of light at the bottom, ready to meet her end.

Acrobats leapt and tumbled on the sands. Beta's eyebrows drew together, and her head tilted as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. *What manner of death is this?* She glanced at Martel but found no clue in his grim expression. He looked straight ahead, and they all kept walking, taking her along with them.

Towards the stands, to where Kai stood, eyes gleaming. Beta frowned, examining the people around him, their faces contorted as if they were wearing masks. Glancing back over her shoulder, she watched the acrobats as she trudged forward. Then one looked at her and smiled, splitting his red lips into a lurid grin filled with serrated teeth. Beta stumbled as the acrobat contorted in a way no human could, his legs lengthening, arms twisting as he reached wildly for the woman behind him. She placed a hand to her forehead, thinking she was still feverish.

*Maybe I'm dead and this is my personal hell.*

Lurching as Martel stopped in front of her, she turned her attention forward again, as her attendants stepped aside, and Kai gazed down on her like a benevolent uncle. But she'd seen that look enough to know not to trust it.

A blur at the edge of her vision drew her attention away. Where the female acrobat had been a large snake now reared, weaving its head back and forth, its yellow eyes trained on her. Beta rocked away but then sensed Kai behind her. She slid her gaze sideways to look at him.

"Welcome to my Circus of Devils." He spread his arms out, opening them to the arena. "Sit. Drink."

Beta sat, too numb to resist, though she didn't accept the drink he poured for her himself. Her mind heaved, trying to force some order, some normality on what she was seeing. But whatever rational explana-

tion it came up with was erased when the scene in front of her contorted again.

With the slightest cough from Kai the crowd quieted. The editor stepped into the arena and the acrobats tumbled away.

Kai leaned close. "You should really like the show tonight." As he shifted away, Beta smelled cooked eggs and a cloying sweetness. But soon her attention was dragged back to the arena. Her stomach knotted as someone was brought out, tied spread eagle on a giant wooden wheel that was rolled across the sands. Although a hood covered the man's head, she'd been close to that body often enough to recognize who it was.

*Galo.* Beta's lips opened and closed, but nothing came out, as the hood was pulled off a face that had been beaten purple.

"He's like Atlas, isn't he? His arms holding up the world. Well, holding up hell maybe." Kai picked up his wine cup in one hand, the other patting Marissa's head like she was a dog. He took a gulp from his cup, then looked at her own drink, untouched. "The wine's not to your liking?"

Beta's eye slid towards him against her own volition. Willing herself to ignore him, she forced her gaze back to the arena, to the movement at the portcullis on the far side. Her eyes widened as she tried to make sense of the creatures she saw strutting out. Their bodies were skeletal with feathers molting from patches of bumpy, sagging skin. Slow horror crawled up her spine as a terrible recognition crept into her brain: deformed vultures, larger than any bird she'd ever seen, were being led across the sand. There was something about the way they bobbed their heads; Beta thought for a moment that the collars around their necks were too tight. Then she noticed the milky white of their eyes and realized they were blind. And yet when they swivelled their heads her way, almost in unison, she would have sworn they could see her. And when they snapped their beaks, she was glad for the collars and the chains that bound them.

Galo's eyes widened as he took in the vultures, and he started babbling in a language Beta didn't know but she understood well enough what he meant. His wild gaze flitted between the birds and Kai. But Kai just peered back at him, his face placid as he stroked Marissa's hair when she laid her head on his knee.

Beta swallowed the bile that crept up her throat, looking away as the vultures tore into Galo. Her hands came to her ears as a strangled scream was wrenched from his throat, and continued rippling across the sand, though she could hardly hear him over the roar of the rabid crowd. She glanced around at the keen faces, including Marissa's, whose eyes shone as she glanced at Kai, her lips forming words Beta couldn't make out.

"Of course, my pet," Kai said, his hand patting the girl's head. He stood, a long knife appearing in his hand, and the crowd fell silent. The vulture-keepers jostled the reluctant birds back, blood and gore dripping from their beaks, as he stepped out onto the sands in his white robes. The angry birds snapped at him, their garbled caws expressing their displeasure. He snapped back in another foreign tongue and the birds quelled.

Kai stepped up to the now catatonic Galo, and sunk the knife into the man's torso, just below the sternum, and drew it up with a strength Beta was shocked his lean frame possessed. He plunged a hand into the hole he'd created and, after rummaging around, drew it out again, clutching something.

*The heart*, Beta realized as he turned around. Red splatters covered his white robes. As he walked back across the sands, the vultures once more descended. When he got closer, Beta could smell the blood. When her mouth started salivating and her stomach twitched in hunger, her throat burned with bile. Kai glanced at her as he came up the steps, a small smile on his lips as if he knew what she felt. Her cheeks went hot. He looked at Marissa and handed her the heart. Beta

watched out the corner of her eye then her head snapped around, eyes going wide, as the girl greedily sank her teeth into it.

“Did you enjoy tonight’s opening act?” Kai looked at her, the corners of his eyes creasing in a smile.

Beta jerked her gaze away as once again the bile threatened to turn to vomit.

## VIII



BETA LAY ON HER COT, facing the window, and savoured the stabbing jolts of pain the bright light sent through her skull as she picked off the tiny spiders that crawled her way in their unending trek from somewhere down below up into the sunlight. She relished their squirms as she squished them, their carapaces crunching between her fingers. As her ears twitched at the pop of the latest one, she wondered what kind of monster she'd become. Another spider crept up the wall towards the window, and her hand hovered as it hastened its scurry, perhaps sensing the death that loomed over it.

Beta pulled her hand back, dropping it on her side. At the same time, she heard a clang of metal on metal down the corridor. She held her breath, hoping that whoever was out there was going to one of the other cells. Her ears perked up as they picked up a swish of fabric over shuffling feet, followed by heavy footsteps and another ping. She tried to pick out the gait in the steps so she could put a name to whoever was passing down the corridor. But a buzzing reverberated in her head and a thudding in her heart, masking normal sounds. She sighed when she sensed shapes in the doorway behind her, along with a rhythmic pulsing. *Two hearts*, she thought, then shivered as a chill passed through her despite the heat of the day outside. Knowing she wouldn't be left alone, she carefully turned over. Then pressed herself back against the wall as Marissa came in carrying a tray with a single cup on it.

Martel came next, feet heavy, smelling of sweat and covered in dust from the practice ground. There was a sadness in his eyes despite his expressionless face as he glanced at Beta before looking away. "You need

to eat," he said to the wall as he dropped armguards and helmet on his cot. "Drink."

Marissa moved closer with soft, swishing steps, her lips open and eyes keen. Beta pressed back even further, her gaze flicking between the girl and the cup. Marissa pushed the tray towards Beta. The smell that came from it revolted her and caused her to salivate in equal measure. Her stomach roiled, and she lashed out, knocking the cup over. Her eyes widened as the contents spilled over the tray. She tried to push herself further away but the wall stopped her.

"What is that?" She hated the raw edge to her voice. She forced herself to look away from the spill of red that dripped off the tray onto the cell floor. Martel peered at her but stayed silent.

"I think you know what it is." He turned his attention to Marissa, who had a moue of displeasure on her face. "Go get another one." She scowled at him and opened her mouth as if to speak. He forestalled her. "Please."

His eyes tracked the girl out of the room and watched the door until her footsteps faded from hearing. When there were no more sounds in the corridor, he spoke. "You need nourishment." Beta ignored him though her nostrils flared at the scent of blood.

He continued, filling the silence she left. "Did you know, I've been here for ten years" He reached to his trunk and picked up his string of figurines. Beta's eyes slid sideways, though she didn't actually look at him. "Without realizing it, I've grown old fighting for Kai, rather than taking the vengeance I sought." Martel grunted, running a thumb over one of the figures. He let out a heavy sigh, his shoulders caving into his chest.

"I'd given up, consigned my soul to death and the judgment of those who've preceded me. And then they dropped a badger in my hole. And I had hope again." His head shifted as he looked towards her. "Hope is a dangerous thing." He lifted the string of figures over his head, letting it come to rest over the torc he always wore. "In my pining

for a way to punish him for what they did to me and my family, I've given him what he wanted." He paused as footsteps started to creep down the hallway again. "Well, no more." A shadow lengthened in the doorway, and Martel turned his back to Beta, looking towards the entry as Marissa entered, carrying another cup.

"Leave it," Martel said, glancing from the girl to look at Beta. "I'll get her to drink it." Marissa stared at him for a few long seconds but then turned and left without saying a word.

Beta's neck and cheeks flushed, anger rising from a pit in her stomach. "No, you won't!"

"You have to feed."

"Or what, I'll die? Fine."

"No, you'll become a danger to yourself. And, more importantly, to me." He stepped towards her, but she shuffled back again, eyeing him, her jaw clenched. He peered at her then knelt down to the floor to clean up the blood that had escaped the tray after her earlier fit.

Something twisted inside her at the sight of the blood, as if reaching towards it. "What am I?" Her gums ached, and her mouth salivated. She was like a dog wanting a bone.

"You're a vampire," he said, without looking up.

"A what?" Beta couldn't find a reference point in her cosmology.

"You need to drink blood to survive. To feed the creature that feeds on you. And makes you stronger and faster. Immortal."

"So I'm becoming a monster?"

His hand paused in its cleanup of the blood. "None of us are destined to be monsters. You might not have chosen this, but you can choose what you do with it."

"Are you a vampire then?"

He stared at her for a heartbeat then shook his head. "No, I'm a different kind of beast entirely." He stood up and turned away. "Your dinner's getting cold," he said, his back to her.

Beta scowled at him, then at the new cup the girl had brought. She could smell the blood from here. Clamping her lips together, she lay back down and turned her face to the wall.



BETA STARED OUT THE window, watching as the changing slant of the sun heralded the coming night. She stiffened as a heavy weight sank into the edge of her cot.

“I’m not drinking it,” she said, expecting Martel had brought her a congealing cup of blood. Instead she felt something cold against the skin on her neck. She jerked away, in the same motion turning and grabbing his wrist.

“You still have some blood on your neck, from when he bit you.” She let go of his wrist and he touched the cloth in his hand to her skin again, gently dabbing. “You should really go to the baths.” He worked the cloth a little harder, reaching up behind her ear. He made a sound, half sniff, half huff. “And get your clothes laundered, now that you’ve gotten blood all over them.”

Beta stayed facing the wall, and remained silent, but she didn’t stop his ministrations.

“You’re going to have to feed eventually. And not just drinking blood already stale from a cup. The thing in your blood won’t allow it.”

Beta pressed her lips together to keep from snapping at him as a tear trickled down her cheek. She refused to move to wipe it away. When she didn’t speak, Martel continued.

“But even then you have a choice of whether you’re their creature or your own.” Beta’s neck felt cold as he stopped his cleaning and took the cloth away. “I made that choice years ago,” he said, his voice heavy and deep. “I’ve always been a beast, but not all beasts are evil. I was the one who was hunted by the good people around me.” His deep voice became rougher. “But I was free. I had a small home at the edge of a large

forest that I shared with a wife and two little girls.” There was a long silence, and Beta’s hand came to the beads at her neck. Fire came into his voice when he continued. “I might be their prisoner, but I refuse to be their creature.” Beta swivelled her head towards him. He stared at the far wall, fiddling with the bronze torc around his neck. Beta realized that the two ends were actually fused together – that’s why he never took it off.

“You don’t look much like a prisoner.” She turned back to the wall with a humph.

“We’re not all what we seem. You should know that by now.” Her cot shifted as his bulk left, and she shivered, her back cold without the warmth of another body. “After all, I thought you were stubborn and full of yourself when you showed up here. And look at you now.”

Beta scowled, despite the teasing tone in his voice. She turned back to the room, but froze just as she kicked up to sitting, when a long shadow crept past their door from the now torch-lit corridor. Soon Marissa came into the room, another mug in her hands.

“He says she needs to drink.” The girl ignored her, looking at Martel instead, her face expressionless except for a tension around the eyes. “Now.”

He breathed deeply, then shrugged his shoulders. “Give it here.” Marissa hesitated but did as he asked then left. He came and sat beside her on the cot. Beta was tempted to knock it away again. But she thought he might get in trouble for that.

“I’m not drinking it.” Her voice was even but it lowered as she continued. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Few of us do.” He put the cup down on the small trunk beside his cot.

“My life’s been stolen from me. Again!”

Martel’s voice deepened in response to hers, coming from low in his belly, gaining an angry edge. “We’ve all lost something. Most of us have had something stolen.” He paced towards her, his face contorted by the

red torchlight and the blue moon coming through the window. “My family was stolen from me. My little girls, my wife. My sister and her children.” He glowered at her, his face inches from hers, flecks of spittle flying towards her. “They were all killed because they —” he waved his hand towards the corridor “—Kai and his ilk thought it would make me the beast they were searching for. It would have been so easy to be a monster, and I could have forgotten all the pain. So many times the beast has bubbled up.” He fiddled with his torc, glinting red in the torchlight. “But they wanted a beast they could control, one they could force to do their will. I refuse to give them that.” He dropped the torc against his collarbone and arched an eyebrow as he picked up the cup again. “And now I think I’ve forgotten how to be a beast.”

He stepped towards her again, and she pressed away. “If you don’t drink it...”

“We’ve been over this. So what...I die. I’m fine with that.”

“No, you don’t die. You turn into a crazed monster who can’t tell friend from foe.” He dropped his hand, his lips tight. “Oh wait, you already are.” He turned away with a huff and slammed his free hand into the wall, causing dust to fall from the ceiling and a spider to scurry away. His shoulders heaved as he filled his chest with air before letting it out slowly. He turned back to her. “What I was going to say was, if you don’t feed, you’ll become exactly what they want. Entertainment in his circus rather than choosing for yourself what you become.” He came towards her again, stopping a few feet away. “Do you want to be their creature, or do you want to be free?” He looked out the window. “Some of us would die to be free.”

“If you want to be free, can’t you do that yourself?” she said with a sneer. “You’re some big and tough beast.”

“No.” He fiddled with the torc again. “With this on, I’m just a man. He’s not...they’re not. I wouldn’t get far before they snared me again.” Letting go, he picked up a leather greave to shine.

Beta's eyes narrowed, her curiosity piqued. "What are you without that on?"

He stared at her for a long second. "Sometimes I'm just a man. Sometimes I'm a beast." He craned his neck and cracked his jaw. "A bear to be exact."

"You're a bear?" Beta said, unable to keep the dripping scorn from her tone. "Of course you are."

He opened his arms and glanced down at himself before returning his gaze to her. "I'm a Were. I shift between forms." He returned to polishing his greave.

"So you could become a bug, scurry out of their noose?"

"No, just one of the two: bear or man." He held the greave up, twisting it in the torchlight, then looked at her. "Though there are others who can become other creatures. And there are some that can wear the skin of anyone. Stay away from them."

Beta was silent for a second as she watched him buff the leather. "Are you saying none of those things chose to be good?" The buffing stuttered, but he didn't respond. Coming to a decision, Beta stood up. The world spun around her and she reached for the wall to steady herself.

"You need to feed," Martel said without looking up. "You'll only get weaker until you finally snap."

Beta walked over to the cup by the door and looked down at the crimson liquid. Her stomach twisted, and her veins buzzed. "So, you're saying if I drink the blood, I'll be stronger? Faster?" Moving slowly to keep the vertigo at bay, she picked up the cup.

"Humph." He nodded his head as he watched her, his greave forgotten.

She looked at him over the rim of the cup. "Strong enough to bring down the arena, to take *him* down?"

"I didn't..."

“Fine.” Beta downed the blood in quick gulps. For a second everything was all right. Then her stomach clenched, and her knees buckled.

## IX



THE AIR LEFT BETA'S lungs in the split second before stars filled her vision as she landed on her back in the sand. Quick as she was now, she still hadn't been able to discern the change in Martel's stance that signaled his shift in tactics from power to speed. *Though he still has plenty of power*, Beta thought, realizing how much he'd been holding back in their previous sessions, before she'd been made a vampire. She shook the stars from her head, closing her eyes against the harsh sun overhead. A growing throb had started to radiate from that space between nose and eyes. *If he's this powerful and afraid of Kai....* Beta forced her mind to be quiet and focus on the present.

"You need to guard your left," a musical voice said from the shadows. Beta glanced that way as she stood up, reaching for her sword at the same time. *The stranger. The one who was sitting beside Kai the night I bested Galo.* Her eyes narrowed, the muscles in her jaw tensing. The next thing she knew she was spitting sand from her mouth between bleeding lips, recovering from a foot to the left side of her head. On all fours as she picked herself up, hands and knees raw from trying – and failing – to catch her fall, she eyed Martel.

"He's right," he said, nodding towards the man. "You need to watch your left."

"I wasn't talking to her. *You* favour your left." Martel flicked his gaze towards the stranger, a deep frown on his face. "One of these days, she was going to see it."

Her eyebrows pulling together, Beta shifted her glare from Peregrine to Martel. "What the fuck?" She spat blood at his feet.

“You’re a vampire. You’ll heal.” Martel casually tossed his sword between his hands. “Unless someone cuts off your head.”

“Or stabs her in the heart with an ash stake.” The stranger looked at her with half-closed eyes, leaning against a pillar.

Martel stopped tossing his sword, and came towards her, his weight shifting between his feet. Beta eyed him warily, trying to figure out his next path of attack. She realized the stranger was right – Martel favoured his left.

“Or poisons you with silver,” another voice said from the dark doorway that led to the underground. Beta froze and noticed Martel do the same. Even the stranger went another shade of still as Kai stepped into the grey between dark and light. He turned towards the stranger. “So what do you think, Peregrine?” He nodded towards Martel and Beta, though Beta had no doubt he was referring to her. A glacial anger spread in her abdomen, seeping into her bones, at the thought of being traded again.

The stranger – Peregrine – maintained a casual posture that put her in mind of Leopard pretending he wasn’t going to eat his friend Rabbit. His eyes narrowed as he examined her. “She still young.” He stepped forward to lean against the railing, his face coming into the sun. “Un-schooled. But we might be able to agree on a price if you’re looking to sell her.”

Beta scowled but said nothing.

Kai stepped forward but stayed in the shadows. “Oh, I don’t think I’ll be getting rid of her anytime soon.”

It was Peregrine’s turn to scowl. He stared at her for another long moment before he wiped the frown off his face, replacing it with a smile, and turned to Kai. “That’s too bad.”

“What can I say? The rabble are mad for her. I win whether she wins or loses.”

Beta twitched but forced herself to breathe into her abdomen and dip into wells of patience. Patience she needed if she wanted to be free.



“YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE to do it some time,” Martel said, not looking at her as he carefully put his weapons away.

Beta scowled at his back. It had been a common refrain the past week. He’d been training her hard during the day, every day, and she’d been fighting in the arena each night, winning or losing as instructed. And now she was knackered, despite how much she tried to hide it.

“You have to feed from the source.”

Beta knew what he meant: she was starving by drinking blood from cups that were brought to her from who knows where...who knows who. She tried to maintain her scowl, but her blood told her the truth of his words, re-enforced by the ache in her bones. She tossed her weapons down in the rack, where they pinged against others, in full knowledge that this careless disregard would annoy Martel. *You need to show them the proper respect*, he’d said, as if they could sense it.

She scoffed, quietly, and stalked out of the arena, not entirely sure where she was going. If she returned to their shared cell, he’d be in her face again soon enough. But besides the cell and the practice yard, there was nowhere she wanted to be.

Her feet carried her along the corridor. At the end she turned left, away from the cell instead of towards it. It didn’t take her long to realize where her body was taking her. Despite her weariness, a small, slow smile crept onto her face. *The baths. Just what I need.* Though she knew full well it wasn’t a bath she was after. *Valerian.*

When she entered the baths, the heat and the humidity hit her like she’d walked into a wall, and her head spun. Sheets of steam hung heavy in the air, redolent with rosemary and pine. But she had no problem finding Valerian through the dimly lit rooms. She could hear his heart beat, his blood ticking through his veins. As she walked up behind him, she realized she could tell that he was fully human, unlike many of the shapes that lurked in the haze.

Beta lay a hand on his back, trailing her fingers lightly down his spine looking for an invitation as always. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. *Invitation enough.* She ran one hand up the back of his neck into the curls that hung limp, stray ones sticking to his cheeks in the damp. The other hand she snaked around and ran down over his abdomen to cup his genitals. She sensed more than heard the hiss of air in through his teeth. He twisted sideways.

“Should I bathe you first?” he said, his voice a shade deeper than normal. The eyebrow facing her arched.

Beta grinned and raised her hands above her head in mock submission. Sweat tickled as it ran down between her breasts. He lathered her with soap before carefully rinsing her off with a sponge. She peered down her nose at him through the shimmer of heat as he washed her legs before standing in front of her again, his gaze flicking between her shoulder and her eyes. She pushed him back into the wall and leaned into him, rocking her hips against his pelvis. Her pulse pounded louder in her ears, mixed with the murmur of blood through his veins. He reached a hand up to caress her left breast. Grabbing his wrist, she lifted that hand over his head, pressing it against the stone. He bucked his hips, trying to regain some control even if that wasn't their relationship. Beta pulled away, giving him a wicked smile. She tipped her head forward, running her lips over his toned torso. She sensed the beating of his heart as she circled his left nipple with her tongue.

A wave of heat flushed through Beta as her lips reached his neck. The world tipped sideways. She gasped, her mouth opening of its own volition. Then she found her nascent fangs sunk into his neck, blood pulsing into her mouth. The half-starved beast inside her gulped it down, and Beta became lost in a haze of red tinged with a copper tang. The pulsing slowed into a sensuous throb, and she sucked harder, trying to get every last drop.

Then strong hands grasped her shoulders and pulled her back. A snarl formed on her wet lips as she turned to her assailant. Then she re-

alized what dripped down her chin. Her gaze fell to the tiles and the pink droplets: blood mixed with water. She returned her attention to Valerian, who had slumped and was sliding down the wall. Beta backed away in horror, her hand coming to her mouth, as a figure stepped past her to examine him.

“Oh my god, I’ve killed someone.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, her throat tight.

“No, he’s not dead yet.” Beta’s focus shifted for a second to the figure in the mist. *Peregrine. The stranger.*

“I drank his blood.” Bile rose in her throat and she clamped her hand hard over her mouth.

The man looked back at Valerian, running a finger over the mark on his neck. “I’d say he’s been bitten before.” Looking over her shoulder, he made a motion with his hand and a pair of shadows passed her. “Take him to the doctors.”

“I could have killed him!” Beta’s eyes went wide and her voice quiet at a dawning realization. “I wanted to.” She fell to her knees, heedless at the pain from the hard floor, as her stomach heaved.

“But you didn’t.” He grabbed her shoulders and held her gaze, then continued, his voice harsh. “Don’t you dare throw it up. It’s a gift, even if he didn’t mean to give it.”

Peregrine rubbed a hand across her back as she took deep breaths in, trying to do as he said, trying to keep it down. Saliva pooled in her mouth, and she spat pinkish liquid on the floor, but she managed not to throw up.

Finally, his hand left her back to grab her elbow in a firm grip. “Come with me,” he said, in a tone the brooked no argument.

Beta breathed deep then exhaled in a shuttering sigh. Despite her plans to kill Kai, she didn’t relish facing his anger – she’d seen the punishment he meted out. Nonetheless, she allowed herself to be dragged along, naked, her clothes left in the baths. The corridors were empty,

except for the omnipresent spiders. She noticed the evening was warm, ameliorating the chill on her drying skin.

Her eyebrows pulled together at that thought, and she glanced around. They were going up, not down. Away from Kai's usual haunts. Soon they were in a passageway she knew well.

Peregrine shoved her harder than seemed necessary through the entryway to the cell she shared with Martel, who was sitting on his cot. He hastily hid something under his leg as Beta stumbled to her own cot and dropped herself into it, the wood and twine creaking.

"You don't have to hide your education from me, Martel," the stranger said, and Martel pulled out the scroll he'd been reading, putting it gently in his trunk. "But this one needs a teacher."

"What happened?"

"She almost killed someone." Peregrine and Martel both looked at her, and her cheeks became warm.

"That's nothing new," Martel said, but his tone was suspicious.

The stranger's voice softened. "She fed, without tutelage."

"Ah."

Beta turned to the wall, tired of being examined.



BETA STOOD IN THE ARENA, her previous opponent's blood dripping from her sword, her own blood dripping from her teeth. Her fangs. She peered at the new creature they'd sent against her. The woman was thin, willowy pale, and had no intent in her movements. Beta sighed. She was supposed to lose to this one. She glanced sideways at Kai, her eyes sliding over to his companions. The strangers she'd seen before, Peregrine, and the woman with alabaster skin and flaming hair.

She'd been a vampire for a week now, still training hard with Martel every day, and fighting in the arena every night. And being told by Kai who to win against and when to lose. So far, she'd done as she was told.

But tonight, she had a sense from Kai, or rather from the woman beside him, that there was more riding on this combat. The woman seemed very attentive to the fight, her eyes bright. The stranger, on the other hand, leaned back in his seat, his body casual, arms crossed over his torso, but he stared at her with fire in his eyes. Then his gaze flicked sideways towards Kai, exposing for a moment the animosity she'd sensed between them, running under all the surface cordiality.

Beta saw a blur out the corner of her eye, and felt a breeze brush her cheek, just before a lance of pain crossed her arm. She looked from the cut on her arm to her opponent who was still standing where Beta had left her, but blood dripped from the woman's long fingernails. Beta realized this fight might not be as easy to win as she thought, even if she weren't supposed to lose.

There was another breezy breath, almost like a sigh, and something struck the back of her head. Blood tickled her scalp as it seeped from a line of sharp pain. She squinted at her opponent, standing in the same place she'd been a second ago. Beta swung her trident in an arc, stabbing out at the other fighter, but all it hit was air, throwing Beta off balance. Another breeze crept over her thighs, and she found her legs knocked out from under her. She landed with an oomph, winded, and her trident rolled out of her hand as it hit the ground. When she opened her eyes after the momentary automatic closing, her opponent was still where she'd always been.

Her eyes caught Kai, a flicker of a smile on his face, and the woman beside him, her eyes glassy, her lips parted. Beta scowled. She picked herself up to standing again, hefting her shield and taking a half step towards the trident. As she did, she caught a blur in her vision again and abandoned the trident in favour of the short sword at her hip. She closed her eyes as she lay her hand on the hilt, drawing the sword as a breeze caressed her right shoulder. She let the sharp pain that followed give her focus as she stabbed behind her, at the point where the breeze

had passed a second ago. The blade met air and Beta braced herself for more pain. Instead she heard a sound.

“Ah!” Her opponent returned to her spot just out of arm’s reach, blood blossoming from her left waist. Unprepared, she continued to fall back. Beta didn’t give either of them a chance to take a breath before she descended on her opponent, her hand around the woman’s neck, the point of her short sword on the woman’s solar plexus.

Beta torqued her neck, twisting her head to face Kai. A small smile threatened to lift the corners of her mouth as she noticed the white anger on his face. The woman beside him had red splotches on her alabaster cheeks and her nostrils flared. Beta realized she’d made another enemy today. She shrugged – that was okay. If she was going to live forever, she supposed she’d have a lot of them. Her gaze paused for a second at the stranger. He looked...sad. Then she turned to the editor, who ran his hands down his toga and bit his lip. He knew how the fight was supposed to end. He glanced from the crowd calling for death, to Beta then to Kai, who gave the slightest nod of his chin. The editor turned his thumb downwards. Beta looked back down at her opponent, the woman’s eyes wide.

Beta stood and took a step back. “No,” she said, turning to Kai as she tossed the sword in the sand. “You can do your own dirty work.” She turned to walk away when she felt a whisper of air pass her cheek, and her muscles tensed, bracing for her opponent’s revenge. But then she heard ‘whoomph’ and, turning, saw the bolt pierce the woman’s chest. She spun back to glare at Kai, who held a crossbow.

“The people need their bloody ending,” he said with a shrug, his voice barely carrying over the roar.

## X



“WHAT DID YOU DO?” A voice bellowed, echoing in her head.

Beta tried to pull herself from a lethargic sleep as Martel stalked into their shared cell, letting the door bang open. Rather than the red she expected, his face was a shade of pale that contrasted with his usual ruddy complexion. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, she swung her feet out of bed then stared at him, but before she had a chance to respond to his outburst, he went on.

“What did you think you’re doing, playing with him like that?”

“I...” Beta racked her sleepy brain to figure out what he was on about. *Kai*. She paused to consider her answer, then went with honesty. “I want to make him spitting mad.”

Martel plopped down on his cot, shoulders slumping. He ran his hands over his face, then graced her with a flinty gaze. “I think you’ve succeeded.” A smile started to creep onto her lips. His expression turned grave and her smile faltered. “If you had any idea of the viper you’re dealing with, you wouldn’t smile.”

“But if he’s mad, maybe he’ll be off his guard. He is mad, yes?”

“Mad, yes.” He nodded, the movement slow and deliberate. “But not exactly spitting, more like cold fire.”

“Maybe it’ll unbalance him, and he’ll do something rash.” Beta shrugged, annoyed. “And if he kills me, I’m no worse off than I was before.”

“Huh.” Martel scoffed, his shoulders heaving. His head was heavy in his hands again. When he looked back at her, his expression was sad rather than angry. “You really haven’t learned much, have you?” He stood and started taking off his armguards, laying them down careful-

ly on the cot. “He doesn’t kill those who anger him.” He picked up the string of wooden figures from the makeshift table. He was quiet for a minute, and Beta was about to lie down again when he put the figures down and glanced at her. “He tortures them. He kills their family —”

“My family is a world away.” Beta crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at him.

An eyebrow arched at her. “— and their friends.” He turned away, back to removing his limited armour. “He takes the things they love and, one by one, destroys them.”

“Has he threatened you?” Beta asked, her voice quiet, chastened.

Martel was silent as he sat down again, a pot of ointment in one hand. He shook his big head, his usually neat hair sticking out at angles. “He doesn’t threaten. He just does.” He glowered at her, then scooped out a large daub of ointment and started rubbing into a spot on his thigh, where a long scar was visible. Beta hugged her knees to her chest, leaning back against the rough brick, cool against her fevered skin. Watching him work his thigh reminded her of her father tending to the cattle, kneading and petting them when they grumbled.

“You don’t heal like a vampire?” Beta brought her fingers to her arm, where the lacerations from her last fight were already healed.

He glanced up at her before scooping out another blob of ointment. He shook his head, then started rubbing his left shoulder. “No. Once upon a time, I healed faster. But not —” He paused and looked her way. He tried to mask it by craning his neck so he could reach a difficult spot. Beta didn’t buy the feint, but she didn’t push it. “Not now.”

Beta uncurled from her cot. “Here, let me do that,” she said walking over to him. “Lie down.” He hesitated for a second, eyebrows pulling together, but he handed her the ointment when she held out her hand, and did as he was told, lying face down on his cot. She crawled up over him, noticing a long, white scar crossing his shoulder. “There’s a reason you favour your left.”

Martel grunted when she set to work on him, and when she got her elbow involved to really work on the knotted scar tissue, his back rose and fell in deep, slow breaths.

“You have a knack.”

“My dad used to massage the cows.”

He huffed, but otherwise didn't respond. She kept working in silence for a few long minutes, and his breathing slowed, the muscles and knots finally starting to release. A few more minutes and a soft snoring started. She debated pressing her elbow into a particularly tight spot but decided to let him sleep. As carefully as she could, she reached for the lid to the ointment and corked it, then shifted off of him to put it down on his trunk.

She turned to go back to her own cot, but found her wrist enveloped in a vise-like grip. She looked down at Martel, surprised he was awake.

“Follow through.” His voice was thick, heavy with sleep.

Beta didn't respond, she just tugged her wrist, trying to free it, but he just gripped it more tightly.

“Whatever happens in tonight's fight, follow through.”

“What?” That hadn't been what Beta was expecting. But he was sleep-addled.

“You have a problem with follow through.” He looked at her, his eyes not as sleepy as she thought. “Promise you'll finish it.” Beta pulled away again, but Martel kept hold of her wrist. “Promise.”

“All right, I promise.” He let go at that, apparently satisfied, but then his hand reached under the mattress of his cot.

“Take it. Use it.” He thrust a blade at her, startling her. The matte grey had a streak of lighter metal etched into it. “Silver.” His voice was rough, his eyelids slipping closed.

“One of the banes,” she whispered, holding the hilt in one hand, the fingers of her other holding up the blade. “See, I've learned something.” Sitting back on her cot, she slipped the blade under her own mattress

then leaned against the wall, rubbing her wrist for a minute. Then she curled back up, hugging her knees, and watched him as he fell asleep again. Soon she was left to her own thoughts with only the snuffle of Martel's snoring for company.



OVERHEAD, THE CIRCLE of sky above the practice yard had turned a bruised purple, speckled with the first of the stars as Beta twisted and flowed through her warmup routine. She kept up the movements, despite the shivers that ran up her spine, as she sensed Kai approaching behind her. It amazed her how she knew it was him, how clearly the pattern of his gait and swish of his clothes announced his presence to her vampire ears. She shrugged her shoulders and started moving her arms in circles. She froze, arms lifted in mid-arc, when she felt the tip of a knife under her shoulder blade.

Kai strode casually around her, dragging the tip of the blade along her almost bare torso, dressed as she was in a halter and pants, ready for a fight. She winced at the sliver of pain as it drew a bead of blood along her skin but kept silent. She continued the roll of her shoulders back, bringing her arms to her sides as he came to stand in front of her, the blade now poised under her left breast, near her pounding heart.

"You think you're so smart, being willful. What do you hope to accomplish?" Beta stayed silent, just staring at him, knowing full well his question was rhetorical. "If you want to die so badly, win another fight that I tell you to lose."

That piqued Beta's curiosity...she'd been told to lose *every* fight. Her eyes narrowed. "Why do you want me to lose all the time?"

He gave her a small smile, lowering the sword. "It's all about the game." The smile fell, and the sword came back up. "Don't worry. I'll spare your life again; I have plans for you after all. As long as you don't

fuck with me.” He lowered the sword slowly. “Win the first fight. I’ll give you a sign for the second.”



BETA STARED AT THE beast at her feet. The fight had been a near thing. Even though Kai had told her to win, she’d almost lost. Maybe he’d forgotten to tell the minotaur. Her thigh burned where the creature’s tusk had stabbed her. She’d had to kill it without waiting for the signal from the editor just to stay alive.

Beta stepped back then spun into a low crouch, keeping light on her feet, as another roar rumbled through the floor, up her legs and into the pit in her stomach. The torches and candles were low tonight, leaving long, tortuous shadows filling the space. She cast her gaze around, trying to find the source of the sound, as a snarl quaked the air. Beta heard a cough somewhere far up in the stands, otherwise the crowd was silent as death. A movement caught her eye, and she glanced at Kai. He mouthed a word. *Lose*. Beta squinted at him, trying to decide in that second if she would comply.

Another rumbling travelled across the sands, a vibration not caused by any growl or roar. It was familiar but it still took her a second to figure out what it reminded her of: a stampede. The feet of some beast pounded against the ground. Some very large beast. The door on the far side of the arena groaned as something slammed into it.

Then that door began to open. Sweat beaded on Beta’s brow, and her hands were slick. She clutched her shield and sword more tightly, bracing herself for what was to come.

*Nothing*. The silent expectation of the crowd hung heavy in the rank air. The dark maw of the tunnel remained empty while the pit in her stomach grew. Beta’s eyebrows drew together, and she took a step towards the opening. Then she heard a snuffle, then a scratch, and she froze. A chest-piercing roar echoed from the tunnel and the ground vi-

brated. But Beta had little time to take it in before a mass of brown charged into the arena, bearing down on her.

Beta barely had a breath to tuck and roll out of the way before the creature was on her. The tip of one of its claws still dragged across her skin, drawing a line of searing pain on her already wounded thigh, as it bowled through the space where she had been. She popped up from her tumble, spinning around in the same movement to face the creature, getting her first good look at it. *A bear*. She shrugged her shoulder, which still ached from the fight with the minotaur.

She saw the bear had done the same – it had turned to face her, trunk heaving in short, sharp breaths. It looked around, its eyes squinting. It snorted and shook its heavy head, which let Beta get a better look at it. Besides being humongous, it was covered in reddish brown fur, with a golden patch at the throat. She caught glimpses of some sort of lariat buried in the fur around its neck. *The bones of its victims, perhaps. Or maybe it slipped its leash.*

She watched the bear for signs of weakness as it took a couple of plodding steps around the arena, eyes on her, but she saw none. Instead, she scrambled left as the creature galloped straight at her, shockingly fast for such a large beast. She tumbled to the side, popping up in time to get her head walloped by a massive paw. She shook off stars from her vision but was amazed that her cheek hadn't been serrated by the creature's claws. Then the bear pawed at its own ear, before turning and charging at her again, and finally she saw a glimmer of weakness she might be able to exploit. The bear listed ever so slightly to its left side.

As it passed her, Beta dodged and her sword sliced into the bear's left shoulder, but she knew it wasn't enough. She spun around to face an angry bear up on its haunches, nearly twice her height. It growled with all its might, the sound pounding through her chest, hurting her ears. She stabbed the sword in front of her, driving herself forward with any dregs of momentum she could muster as the bear descended, its torso coming straight towards her sword.

She felt a moment of resistance and braced herself before the sword slid into the bear's chest. It reeled back, almost tearing the sword from her grasp, but instead her grip was so tight she was dragged along.

Beta landed on top of the bear and scrambled to get out of the way of its still deadly paws. But the bear relaxed completely, its taloned paws dropping to its sides, its eyes opening and closing, a seeming smile on its snout. Its fur started to disappear, what was left becoming more tinged with red. The snout shortened.

And Beta watched, horrified, as the bear became her mentor. Her friend. "Martel." Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

A paw, no longer a paw, came up to pat her face. "It's okay." The words were still gruff, rough. His head lolled, his eyes sliding sideways to where Kai sat, before returning to her. "Remember what I said. Follow through."

"But—"

"No buts." His eyes rolled up, and his hand came to hers. "Use the blade." Then his hand dropped to his chest as his eyelids fluttered. They opened once more as he clutched the chain around his neck that had replaced the torc – it was the string of figures that always sat on the trunk by his cot. "Then take my family home."

*Use the blade.* Beta knew he didn't mean her dinged up old sword. She forced herself not to look at her kit, where the silver-etched blade Martel had given her sat. She looked into his big brown eyes, through her own watery vision. She nodded, her head barely moving, then his hand dropped to the ground and his eyes opened one last time but didn't see her, a smile full-blown on his face.

Beta clutched the necklace and tore it from Martel's neck, her lips pressed together.

## XI



BETA TOURED THE ARENA clutching the necklace, her so-called trophy. She punched her one fist in the air, her other hand clutching her trident, lathering up the crowd into a rabid frenzy, until she got to Kai. She peered at him, her chin lifted, until he called for quiet. Suddenly there was so much silence it almost hurt. His lips were thin, his eyes flat.

“You just killed my best fighter,” he said, his even voice carrying throughout the large space. His eyes were tense as he spoke, even though he opened his arms in a gesture of generosity. “You deserve a prize. Tell me what you want.” He arched an eyebrow and Beta opened her mouth, pausing to consider her words. When she hesitated, he continued. “Except your freedom. I can’t give you that.” A serpentine smile came to his face.

Beta looked at her toe as she dug it into the sand. “Not my freedom, no.” She returned her gaze to him. “The freedom of the others.” A rustle cascaded up the tiers of seating, and a worried murmur rippled through the crowd. Catching the expressions of the spectators nearest Kai out the corner of her eye, she let a smile tug at the corners of her mouth as she relished the moment of realization that the program of their gory show had changed.

His smile dropped, and his face paled with anger, the lips pulling into a thin line. “You don’t know what you ask.”

At a shift beside him, she glanced at the stranger, Peregrine. His sandy skin had gone ashen, his eyes wide. Even his lips were pale and slightly open. A twitter rippled through her gut – maybe Kai was being unnaturally truthful.

The crowd was silent, holding its collective breath. The alabaster and copper woman leaned over and whispered in Kai's ear. His smile returned.

"It turns out that is not in my power to give." A hiss of censure travelled through the spectators, despite their worry of a moment ago. He stood, and casually scanned the stands, raising his voice so all could hear. "Some of these creatures are bound to this circus by stronger, more ancient magic than mine." He slid his eyes back to her. "Luckily for you. Ask for something else."

Beta squinted at him, continuing to trace circles in the sand with her toe. She wished she'd been more prepared for this, or had Martel to advise her. She stopped her gaze shifting sideways to her kit at the thought. Instead she straightened and pulled her shoulders back. "Fine. I ask to fight you."

Another ripple of sound travelled through the arena, but she didn't look to see the reaction on people's faces. Instead she stayed focused on Kai.

His eyebrow quirked. "Is that all?"

"If I lose, I'm yours to do with as you please. If I win —" She shrugged. "Those of us not bound by older powers are free."

His eyes travelled from her face to her feet, and she could guess what he saw from the way her body felt. Bruises on her shins, abraded knees, a cut seeping blood down her left thigh, scraped knuckles, oozing wounds all up her arms, sweat sheening her sand-coated skin.

"Or are you afraid?" She leered at him and took a step back, a hitch in the movement as her hip twinged in pain. She tipped her head back with a sigh, looking up at the ceiling before righting her head to peer at him. When she spoke again, she made sure her voice carried. "If you want me to fight for you ever again, show me that you're stronger than I am." She turned her back on him, and walked over to pick up her trident, the one that had come with her all the way across the sea. In the other hand, she hefted her short sword.

A collective intake of breath sounded, followed by silence. A small smile crept to her lips, and she lifted Martel's necklace over her head, dropping it onto her neck. Lazily she turned back around, to find Kai on the sand, shrugging off his white robes. Beta's breath caught in her throat. He'd always kept covered, and she'd never realized how well defined his muscles were – he was built like one of the wild cats that were brought to the arena.

Turning back to her choice of weapons, she evaluated her options. Keeping the trident, she laid down the sword instead. She ran her fingers across the hilts of the other blades then paused at the small dagger Martel had given her. The dull metal etchings along the blade called to her, despite being hidden in the sheath. *Silver*. She strapped this to her thigh, then skipped the rest of the blades and picked up her net instead, returning to her roots growing up riverside and forcing her brothers to take her fishing. She tested the weight of the trident and net as she turned towards him, getting her hands used to them again.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Are you going fishing?"

"Where's your weapon?" she asked.

He spread his arms. "I *am* my weapon."

Beta ignored the flutter of fear that sent through her stomach. Instead she advanced on him, keeping her weight low, shuffling one foot forward then bringing the other to meet it.

She watched him move, assessing him as he assessed her. His movements flowed one into the next, with no end and no beginning. *Definitely feline*. Beta made a lazy move towards him with the net, not intending to snag him, just testing for some hole she could exploit. But he knew what she was doing and danced away. They continued to circle each other, until he made a casual pass at her, testing her this time. Beta deftly deflected the move with her trident, and, on the return, managed to nick his shoulder with one of the points. He scowled at the line of blood; when he turned back to her, his face was serious.

In a blur of limbs, he attacked. It took all Beta's skill to track the leg that tried to sweep her own out from under her and the hands that tried to grab her and throw her off balance. She leapt over the leg, but one of the hands got hold of her trident, yanking it out of her grip and forcing her to spin out of the way. She found her centre again and turned to face her opponent. He sneered at her as he spun her trident casually between his hands, as comfortable with it as if it were his own. He shifted back and forth on his feet, lowering his centre of gravity. Like a snake, the trident its three-pronged tongue. Beta mimicked his movements, except in her hand she got the net ready to throw. If only she could find an opening.

She unfurled the net, then realized she'd misjudged the moment. He grabbed it in his free hand and yanked hard, almost pulling her off her feet as he drew her towards him. Beta tried to tug the net out of his grasp, unsuccessfully. She thought for a moment of letting go but by then they were face to face. The tips of her own trident came up below her jaw.

"Now will you fight for me?" he said, his face inches from hers. She could smell the death in his breath, and felt the hungry beat of his heart. "Or will you die?"

She saw that he didn't really care which option she chose.

"I'll die," she said, as she struggled in his grasp, twisting her torso back to make a bit of space between them. The trident dropped lower, and he yanked her again. But that just added force to her own move towards him. "But not before you." Martel's dagger, laced with silver, slid up between his ribs and found his heart. It was plunged in even deeper by the combined force of him pulling her close again and her falling into him. His eyes went wide, then he was forced back by her forward momentum. Unable to stop the fall herself, she fell on top of him and one of the prongs of the trident pierced her solar plexus. She flopped to the side, hand to her torso, though she couldn't stem the flow of blood.

The sound of a thousand feet stampeding out of the arena reverberated through the ground, and a whirlwind of murmuring filled the air. Beta lay in the circle of torchlight, watching the dust motes float down, like a thousand bright stars. A thousand souls. Every time she breathed, blood bubbled from the gash below her sternum, though she didn't feel the pain from the wound itself anymore. Given the countless other cuts and abrasions, the bruises and strained muscles, she didn't think she could move if she wanted to. Luckily, she didn't want to, happy to lie there and watch the stars fall. She heard rumbles all around, accompanied by truncated shouts and haphazard screams. She heard prayers and incantations and whispered thanksgiving. But it was all far away so she paid it no mind. She almost thought she could hear the specks of light touch her skin. Then the sound got louder, and she pulled her eyebrows together. An effervescent buzz in her veins disturbed her serenity. A buzz she realized she recognized. *Vampire*.

"Let me die in peace," she said as a shadow blocked out the light. The form crouched beside her. Despite herself, her eyes slid to the creature's face. *The stranger. Peregrine*.

"You're not dying." He placed a hand by the wound on her stomach, which didn't pulse blood at his touch. "It's already healing."

Beta let out a deep sigh. "You don't always get what you want."

"No." The stranger tipped his head and peered at her for a long minute. "But sometimes you get what you need. And I think you need to fulfill a last request." He glanced at Martel's figurines, still around her neck. "If you let me, I'll help. And I'll show you that you can choose what kind of vampire you are." He looked up then returned his gaze to her. "But you have to decide soon. The arena is collapsing."

Beta stared at the hand he held out, still not sure she could move. But after a second, she willed her hand to lift and it listened. She grasped his hand in a surprisingly firm grip.

## XII



THE SUN SET OVER THE grasslands, painting the land in hues from pale yellow through tilapia pink to blush red. Giving her a wide berth, a herd of animals traversed from the river towards a clump of trees. A breeze rustled through the parched grasses, and she pulled her cloak more tightly around her, tearing her gaze away from the vista back to the tree beside her. An ancient, gnarled thing, it presided imperiously over the plain as it had for generations. As she knelt at its trunk, the wind stirred the leaves, and it sounded like siblings whispering secrets to each other under the stars. She almost heard her sister's voice, even though she was long dead.

The grass shifted beside her, and she glanced at her companion, only now divesting himself of layers of fabric that had protected him against the daytime sun. *Her vampire teacher*. Peregrine had kept her company across continents. But she knew the end was coming, could see it in the cast of his skin, the gleam in his eyes when they came across a solitary human. But he'd stood at her side as she'd returned Martel's necklace of figurines, with one addition, to his home, where she left it at a tree under a rock since he had no family to return it to. So she'd stand by Peregrine a little longer and do what was needed in the end.

She ran her finger tips over the rough bark down to the base, searching for the hollow that had been there years ago. She hesitated for a moment at the thought of what might have made its home in the cleft. But then she remembered: she was a vampire, she'd heal. Unlike her sister. Beta removed the last yoke from around her neck. The simple bead necklace her sister had given her before Beta had left. She placed it in the gap, their secret cache. A cough sounded beside her.

“I’m coming.” Beta got up, dusting the dirt off her leather leggings. Taking one last look across the plain, she breathed in deeply through her nostrils, savouring the smells of home one last time, holding the air in her lungs for a second before exhaling, then turned back to Peregrine.

“Have you decided on a new name yet?” he asked as they walked back to the horses.

She glanced at him then at the purpling horizon where a star caught her eye. She’d already been Beta and Bella. “Bea” she said. *Voyager*.

# DID YOU ENJOY A CIRCUS OF DEVILS?



IF YOU ENJOYED THE tale of Beta, and are interested in more dark, adult vampire tales, check out the main *Bloodborne Pathogens* series. Beta joins the cast in *A Scarlet Fever*, where she's taken on the moniker Bee.

You can also join my mailing list<sup>1</sup> to stay updated on happenings in this bloody world, or you can connect with me on Twitter<sup>2</sup> or Facebook<sup>3</sup>. I'd love to hear your feedback.

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## About the Author

Author of the Bloodborne Pathogens dark fantasy series, C. Rene Astle gained a love of fiction, fantasy in particular, and a voracious appetite for story literally at her mother's knee, being read *The Hobbit* and *Chronicles of Narnia* as bedtime stories - because those are the types of stories her mom wanted to read.

From her father, she got an enduring curiosity about the universe, earned shivering in the dark beside a telescope on cold, Canadian winter nights waiting to witness some celestial event.

Now she fits in writing between her day job, gardening and getting out to enjoy supernatural British Columbia.

Read more at [www.creneastle.com](http://www.creneastle.com).