



Issue#392, Fifteenth Anniversary Double-Issue • Oct. 5, 2023

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## THE TYRANT'S HEIR'S TALE

by Carrie Vaughn

King Matias the Younger walked through his city and considered how fragile it all was.

Samarta, the great city of the crossroads, drew trading caravans from a thousand miles in all directions, to take advantage of the only springs in the region. From the east, long camel trains carried spices, silver, fine wool, tapestries, and a hundred other things. From the west, caravans of wagons and horses brought silk, fur, gems, ink, books, knowledge, and decadent riches. From Samarta, they set off north and south to a dozen other cities. Scores of caravanserai served them with food, provisions, fresh camels, and equipment. Any treasure could be found here, a dozen languages spoken, a hundred gods worshipped at a thousand shrines. Every kind of food was served. There were luxurious bathhouses, mosaic fountains, rich gardens. The caravans carried away stories about the great oasis of Samarta, drawing even more travelers to see for themselves. The city traded in curiosity and wonder.

But all this was new. Only in the last twenty years had Samarta returned to what it had been in legend, since the death

of the Tyrant and the rise of the new king, Matias the Elder, Matias the Liberator, Matias the Savior.

His son was merely “the Younger.” And this was all fragile.

He had ruled for less than a year. In all the markets, at all the caravanserais, he knew the question lingered: would prosperity last under the heir? Surely it would. Surely it must.

Matias asked this question himself, but the existential problem was too large to solve. He had a more immediate question that needed an answer. After dark, dressed plainly and hidden under a cloak and hood, he left the palace and its gardens in the center of Samarta. No one knew him, and it amused him that people would recognize the garb of a king before they recognized him. Now, the only thing that marked him were the two guards flanking him. They also wore cloaks, swords hidden in the folds.

Even this time of night, the city was frenetic. Three caravans had arrived this week, and that meant whole teams of drovers and traders were off duty, recently paid, and looking for entertainment. Merchants were celebrating good trades or trying to forget bad ones. Taverns were lit with torches, whole squares given over to impromptu festivals. Musicians, acrobats, dancers, and magicians had their hats out.

Many temples and shrines were also lit up, filled with the prayers and chants of clerics and supplicants, giving thanks for

safe passage or praying for safe journeys in the future. A different kind of music.

Matias loved the warm light against the city's distinctive pale stone, the way the noise from one square carried into the next, merging into its own kind of music. The warren of streets that often made him think he was lost until he turned a corner and saw a familiar roofline or a favorite fountain. The city had no planning to it; camps and caravanserais had become permanent and grown into each other over the course of centuries and become Samarta, as a river carves a valley. The bones of the place might not make sense but they were solid. His father had put in paving and drainage that made the warren beautiful. Matias had never quite become lost since he was a boy, but the risk was part of the thrill. He'd like to linger, to take in the scene, but his destination was at the outer edge of the city.

Memtaz Caravanserai had a prime place outside the city walls on the east-bound road. Close enough to the city for convenience, far enough out to have plenty of space for camel trains. They could feed and shelter five hundred camels on short notice, at the peak of the season. It was a bustling village unto itself, with walls and barns, its own well, and a dozen hostlers and workers. Its main inn was one of the best in the region. So was its company.

Matias left the guards at the front gate of the courtyard. They protested mildly, but he assured them that if he was not safe here then the whole city of Samarta might as well fall. This didn't reassure them as well as he'd hoped.

Nelli, the matron of the place, spotted him first, seeing right past the hood and common clothes, and offered a conspiratorial smile. Yes, he was safe here; she would not reveal who he was. Taking him by the shoulders as she would any friend, she stood on tip toe to kiss his cheek, then ushered him to a private alcove at the back of the courtyard and called to a serving girl to bring a jug of wine. The gathering tonight was small, all old friends. Unish, Nelli's burly husband, greeted Matais next. Garan, an impeccably dressed, gray-haired merchant, sat by the fire, his legs stretched out before him. Good; Matias had hoped he would be here. He'd only have to tell the story once.

Garan didn't stand to greet him, not in this setting. Matias settled on a padded chair that was offered him, the nicest of the rough bunch of furniture drawn around the fire. A small concession to his rank. Matias almost argued about it.

"Here for news?" Garan asked.

Matias glanced around the fire, studying the faces, looking for strangers. For prying ears. This courtyard was arguably the safest place in Samarta, even safer than the palace, and he'd

picked a good night to be here. Only a half dozen folk were here: a couple of retired guardsmen, a caravan-mistress turned brewer, a couple of Garan's old cohort. These were his father's oldest friends and trusted compatriots. The one-time conspirators who had made his father king. All folk who should hear this, who might have an answer. The walls of the alcove were low but gave them privacy. No one would intrude.

"To bring news," Matias replied, and the company drew close. Some of their old alertness was still there. Eyes gleamed in firelight, anticipating. Finally, he spoke. "You always said that the Tyrant had no heir."

"Hell, at least wait for the wine before wading in," Garan said.

Very well. The serving girl came with jug and cups, poured for them, then scurried back to the darkness of the courtyard and the light of the inn beyond. Girl—a young woman, rather, with dark hair and a quick manner. New—Matias hadn't seen her here before. He waited until she was gone before starting.

His audience leaned in. Garan put his feet on the ground.

"We found something," Matias began. He had rehearsed what he would say and was determined now to watch their expressions. To see if this was a revelation for them—or if they already knew. "We're expanding the palace kitchens, putting in a new hearth and tables. The place hasn't been really repaired

in years. The builders knocked out a wall—turns out it was a closet that had been sealed up. In the closet was a body.”

They returned stony looks. Matias should have known they'd reveal nothing, the old spies and cutthroats. They put on a good show here. Just regular folk out for a night of drinking. Every one of them wore a dagger on their belts.

Garan took a sip from his cup. “What sort of a body?”

Matias wondered if Garan actually drank anything or merely pretended, wetting his lips, waiting. “One that had been there for some time. It was dried out, desiccated. I don't suppose much air got in there when the place was walled over. The physicians think she must have been there, oh, twenty years?”

“Who was she?” Garan again. The crackling of sticks in the fire grew loud.

“A woman, maybe twenty, give or take a couple of years. She had dark hair. Her belly was cut open. She'd been pregnant.” He spoke matter of factly; he wanted to be clear on the details and didn't go into the horror the workers and servants had all felt at what had happened to her.

“The baby?”

“We've found no sign of one. Maybe the rats carried it off.” Matias caught them glancing at each other, gazes full of unspoken questions, expressions bunched up with thoughts.

Do you know about this? Do you? None dared speak. At one time, the thought of confronting this group gave him chills. Not now, though. “You told my father that the Tyrant had no heir. I know you must have believed that the Tyrant had no children, no heir to avenge him. But now I must ask: did you say there were no heirs because the Tyrant had no children, or because you’d killed his children?”

Nelli was watching Garan, looking to him for how to respond. Garan was looking into his cup.

Unish ventured the observation, “Your father was ruthless, but he never would have condoned the murder of children.”

In fact, they’d been specifically ordered not to. “Which is why you wouldn’t have told him.” His father’s hands were bloody. Matias knew that. Overthrowing the Tyrant had been a bloody business. Couldn’t have been done otherwise. Perhaps Matias shouldn’t be asking these questions. Except he worried that the answer to this one was sure to come back to haunt him.

“I swear to you, Sire, there was no child,” Nelli said suddenly, piercingly. “I would know if anyone would.”

Oddly, the honorific pleased him. It meant they really did see him as their king and not their old friend’s little boy, a child. “Yes, I believe you. The Tyrant kept his consorts hidden. He never displayed any heirs. You were the one who secured

the kitchens and living chambers, Nelli, weren't you? How much do you remember of that night?"

"Every bloody minute of it," she murmured.

"Tell me about the woman," he said.

\* \* \*

### The Matron's Tale

They had planned that night for a year. Only five of them knew every part of it: Matias the Mouse himself, his wife Jan, Nelli, Unish, and Garan, old friends from the trade roads who maybe had a bit of power of their own or shared in whatever made Matias immune to the Tyrant's power. They each had their tasks, gathered their cohorts, and kept close, quiet, working oh so carefully, so nothing would be revealed prematurely. A glorious mosaic where no piece could see the whole picture but each trusted that a grand design would emerge.

Nelli, a former caravan master with her husband, was in charge of securing the palace household, and this was just one of the details that made Matias's coup different than attempts that had come before. They would not just overthrow but undermine. Bit by bit, she put her own people on the staff, replacing, subverting, just a few here and there to lock or unlock a door, to clear a corridor at the right time. Touchy, careful work, and Nelli, who had wrangled thousand-mile

caravans and knew how to keep her crew loyal through the worst part of the journey, was the one to do it.

Her spies made maps. The palace was opulent, but like much of the city it hadn't been planned, instead accruing over time, barracks and outbuildings growing together, joined by new halls and staircases climbing to towers added on piecemeal. This made the place difficult to navigate, but they marked where the kitchens were, the servants' chambers, the doors by which servants came and went to bring food, to carry out laundry, and so on. All the practical details. The Tyrant might have drawn on some wicked supernatural power to rule over the city, but he still needed to eat and have his shirts cleaned. The old village around the palace had been cleared at one time to make a wide courtyard and parade field. Once, a beautiful garden full of date trees and flowering shrubs had filled the space, but the Tyrant had destroyed it when he came to power. The new king hoped to restore it. They hoped to restore many things.

Once the night itself came, the work was almost easy. The doors to private chambers had been flung open, the candles and lanterns put out, so that Matias and his pack seemed like ghosts rising from the stones.

They had orders not to kill children, even if they believed them heirs of the Tyrant.

Garan had secretly come to Nelli and told her this was the one command of Matias's they must disobey. They could not let a single heir live, lest that heir grow up and try to reclaim the throne. Nelli agreed, and she looked but found no evidence of children or infants. No toys, tiny clothing, diapers or swaddling clothes, not so much as a milk-soaked rag. Children left inevitable signs—she had two of her own—and there was nothing.

But she did find the once-pregnant woman, lying dead on a pallet, blood-soaked straw strewn on the floor around her. She was in a closet near the kitchen, a sick room close to water and heat. Almost as if she'd hidden away. Gold and jeweled rings on her fingers indicated high rank. Her youth and beauty suggested courtesan—a consort of the Tyrant.

Nelli's assumption: Garan had done this. His cohort had entered the palace first, to clear the way for Matias, and he didn't trust the others to do what must be done, so he had killed the consort and cut out the infant, just to be sure. Him or one of his bravos.

When Matias had given the order to spare any children, he was likely thinking of his own son, the awkward gangly boy bursting into adolescence. The new prince, if all went well. The Tyrant wouldn't show such mercy. Matias was desperate to.

If Matias saw the body, he'd be furious. She didn't know what he might do, even if he learned his best friend had done the deed. An adult body was too awkward to get rid of all by herself, so she put a blanket up over the door, pulled a barrel and boxes in front of it, and never said a word. Later, she brought in a mason to brick up the door. The closet was dark; he never saw inside it. She searched again and again but never found a child, not a hint of a tiny body. She had no doubt Garan was ruthless enough to kill a newborn. Perhaps he had merely buried the body in a midden heap, among the chicken bones and fish guts, where it would go unnoticed until it decayed beyond recognition. Infants were so fragile.

Even now, she didn't tell this story to Matias's son. She told a different one.

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She said, "You know we couldn't let any heirs live. Even your father, bless his memory, knew this, however much he didn't want to admit it. I was only doing what needed to be done. I hid the body so he wouldn't need to think of it. It was our job to do the hard work."

"And the baby? Was it difficult, killing it?" Matias asked.

She hesitated, then said, "I did what must be done."

"What did you do with it?"

“Strangled it. Tucked it in my basket and carried it out. Buried it.”

So straightforward, Matias thought. Just like Nelli to be so practical. Unish was looking at her with something like horror, drawing back. He hadn't known, then. She'd never told him.

Because it wasn't true.

“I don't believe you, Nelli,” Matias said.

“You know what your father would have done. You know how much we argued over what to do—”

“You were simply sparing him having to face the choice.”

“If you don't believe I could do it—”

“Oh, I think you could, I've heard about all the bandit throats you slit on the road. My father knew that every single person he brought in on this could happily slit throats.” He went around the circle, intending to meet gazes, to acknowledge them. Note their existences and the debt his family owed them. But none of them would look him in the eye. “But I don't think you could cut a woman's baby from her belly in cold blood. Not unless she was already dead and you were trying to save it. But then, why hide?”

“Sire—”

Garan chuckled. No, he wasn't drinking. The cup was full. He'd never brought it to his lips again after that first sip. He said, “You don't have to lie to protect me, Nelli.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, old man.”

The air had gone brittle. Unish held Nelli’s arm, as if pleading. Nelli and Garan were glaring at one another now, a contest.

“I did it, Sire,” Garan said firmly. “And yes, your father never would have condoned it, which is why I never told him. I’m only sorry Nelli found the body before I could dispose of it.”

“And the baby?”

“The body of a newborn is so much easier to dispose of than a grown woman,” Garan said. “Throw it in a fire or cesspit and it’s gone. They practically dissolve.”

One of the men hissed. Another looked away. Garan was trying to be shocking. Matias wouldn’t be baited.

Even as king, Matias rarely had the upper hand among his father’s picked cohort. They’d still be ruffling his hair, if they didn’t have to reach up to do it these days. But he had a story of his own, a secret he hadn’t known until his father whispered it to him on his deathbed.

Matias said, “I saw the body after it was discovered. Even mummified, so many years later, it was clearly a messy death. Bloody. Vicious. Your murders were much cleaner, I recall. Done by garrote, preferably. True thief style. Once you killed

her, you wouldn't have needed to do anything to the baby to kill it too."

"Nerves ran high that night."

"He's lying," Nelli said.

"Nelli, stop," Matias said.

"You think I couldn't kill her?"

Was she bragging? "Stop," Matias repeated. Commanded. She shut up. He wasn't sure she would. "Garan—the cut."

"What?"

"How was the cut made? You've killed many people, but even you must remember exactly how you killed a mother and her child with a knife. Top to bottom? Left to right? In an arc or straight across? I know how it was done, I saw the body. Can you tell me?"

"Straight across," he said flatly, as if daring Matias to contradict him. "You can peel a belly open like a melon that way."

Choosing at random gave him a small chance of being right.

Looking into his cup, Matias chuckled. "Nelli. You found the body, fresh and still bleeding, and assumed Garan murdered her and disposed of the child. You hid the body to keep anyone from finding out. But Garan didn't kill her. Did you, Garan?"

Garan's smile twisted as he stared into his cup and spoke.

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### The Merchant-Spy's Tale

The truth was he hadn't even been in the palace. Unish and Nelli had charge of securing the warren of halls and chambers. They'd infiltrated the staff ahead of time, worked to clear out as many guards and servants as they could, gave the rest the option of fleeing rather than fighting. Most of the real work had been done before that night.

Garan had another job entirely. His task was to get the boy out of the city if things went wrong. Matias the Elder intended his son to live no matter what. Garan positioned himself on the battlements across the courtyard from the tower where they'd stashed the boy to keep him out of the way. He'd been twelve. Old enough to understand what a coup meant but not quite old enough to have a real hand in it, however much he wanted to. His father had given him a job as lookout, to sound a warning if a counterattack came from the city. He'd made it sound important, essential. Earnestly, the boy had declared that he wouldn't fail. He'd been so proud to have a part in it.

In truth, that spot on the tower was the safest place he could be while still in reach of his father and their people. Not in line of sight of arrows, an easy escape route to the outer wall where Garan had horses waiting—just in case. The boy was

watching for nothing; that approach to the palace was a cobbled parade ground, wide open, with no cover. He was set as a lookout on the spot that least needed one.

In some other scenario, the coup failed, leaving Garan and the boy the only survivors. He would have had to raise the kid in some far-off hamlet, in secret, training him, feeding him stories, until they could return to Samarta to try again. Thank all the gods that hadn't happened. Garan suspected he'd be a terrible foster father.

Matias the Younger, his almost-son, was now king. Garan suspected the lad had figured out at some point that that tower never needed a lookout.

The coup hadn't failed. Before dawn, members of their troop had swarmed from the palace, carrying torches and lanterns and cheering. Later, the body of the Tyrant was brought out and placed on a bier in the middle of the courtyard. Matias the Elder himself fetched the boy, found his wife, and kept them close. Declared them his prince, his queen. The newly royal family made themselves visible all the next day, giddy with sleeplessness, ecstatic with victory, parading through the city, declaring that all the old shrines be re-established, the gates in the city walls thrown open, and blood washed from the streets. Whatever Matias's own power and

influence was, the people of the city believed him and celebrated.

Garan had been swept up in it all but didn't take a position in the new ruling house. That was the bargain he'd made: he'd help orchestrate the coup, he'd see Matias made king. And then he would *retire*.

But... there was one thing, a small detail, he'd never told anyone, not even Matias the Mouse. It happened at the darkest part of the night, the outcome still unknown, the moon hidden behind clouds, the city dark, all lanterns dimmed, not even a dog barking. Across the way at the watch tower, the boy had fallen asleep, huddled in his cloak, slumped against the stone wall. At least Garan could keep an eye on him. He would never say a word about that, either, until now.

And in that still, liminal moment, he heard a baby crying, a gasping wail echoing across the courtyard like some nightbird. Desperate, unhappy, then quickly muffled. Whimpering remained audible. He imagined a hand or a blanket at work, a soft plea to be quiet.

A figure appeared, scurrying along the wall toward the servants' door at the back of the courtyard. A scarf shrouded the figure's head and features. Cradled in both arms it held a basket, just large enough to shelter a newborn.

He knew what he should have done. He should have run down the passage stairs to the cobbles and intercepted the figure, demanded to know where she had come from and where she was going. The identity of the baby. Why flee in the night? Only one reason. The same reason he'd be fleeing with the boy—things had gone wrong. The cord he used as a garrote hung on his belt, close to hand. Quick work to finish them both.

But he didn't. He convinced himself it was a serving woman or chambermaid escaping with her own offspring. That was part of the plan, give the servants a chance to flee, not just out of mercy but to spread the word. Whoever this was had no way of knowing the intentions of the palace invaders—after several generations under the Tyrant, they had to assume blood and slaughter the likely outcome of any intrigue. If they had a child, of course they would flee.

He let them go. The figure disappeared out the door and away.

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Matias the Younger had, in fact, realized he'd been placed on the tower to keep him out of the way. He had small children of his own now, so he understood why his father had done what he had. He'd still felt duped and had become sensitive to half-truths.

“You were more important to him than the whole enterprise,” Garan said. “You didn’t know that, did you?”

“I never saw you. Some lookout I was. But I didn’t fall asleep!”

“Oh, yes you did.”

“I wouldn’t—”

Garan shook his head. “You were so young. We all wanted Matias to send you away before we even started, but he wanted you there, wanted you to have a stake in things. To remember what the night cost, and to show you off when he won. I think now that he was right.”

Matias took a drink—he needed wine, to get through this. “I’m comfortable concluding that the woman we found was already dead or dying, and that the cut was made by a midwife or attendant to save the child. And the child lived. We have only to learn, then, who the child was and if they’re a threat now.” If they would come back to avenge their father as Matias had been meant to avenge his, if that night had turned out differently.

“How are we supposed to figure that out?” Unish said, draining his own cup.

They were all going to need more wine.

As if he had asked aloud, a figure came from the darkness of the courtyard, into the firelit alcove. Matias reached for his

knife; so did Garan. Unish stood, and Nelli fluttered. The serving girl stood there, wine jug in hand. Her eyes gleamed, blinking in stunned confusion at their collective reaction.

“I thought you might need more wine?” She offered the jug.

“Fel, you shouldn’t be here,” Nelli said. Though she rarely lost her temper, she seemed about to. “Pour quick, then go.”

The young woman did so, moving to each of them. Garan waved her off; his cup was still full. When she came to Matias, she met his gaze. He felt a sudden, blazing certainty: she’d been eavesdropping, listening to every word, and none of them had noticed. How could they have not noticed? She had been so quiet, so innocuous... as if she had some talent. Some power, even. She looked him in the eye as she refilled his cup. When she finished, she gave a quick smile and turned to go. Matias stopped her.

“You might as well stay. You’ve heard it all so far, haven’t you? Sit and hear the rest, why don’t you?”

He wasn’t sure how the silence and tension could get any stiffer, but they did. All studied her, wondering. Conspirators were a paranoid lot, and Matias had learned at their knees.

“I won’t tell anyone what I’ve heard, I promise,” she murmured. She spoke in the accent of the southern part of the city. Young woman, dark hair and pale skin of the

neighborhoods of old Samarta. Didn't often see those folks on this side of town, the outskirts where the eastern caravanserai were.

"No, you won't," Matias said. And didn't that sound ominous? Garan ought to be proud. He glanced at him; Garan curled a smile in response. At least he'd gotten Garan to actually look at him now. "Fel is your name? I don't know if you have a story to tell. I suspect you do. But I have a story to tell first. Do you remember what they used to say about the Tyrant? About why he never had children? Or, *supposedly* never had children."

\* \* \*

### The King's Tale

It was sometimes said the Tyrant sacrificed his own children to gain his power. That he had a dozen consorts producing offspring and each was bled out immediately at birth, fuel for the magic that kept the city under his control. Sacrifices to the dark god the Tyrant worshipped. No sign of such bloody business was ever found at the palace, the night of the coup. No room where a harem might be kept, no discarded bodies, no ceremonial cups to hold drained blood. Matias suspected those were just stories told to frighten people. Unnecessary—the Tyrant was awful enough without them.

Outside the palace walls was the Square of Justice, where the Tyrant ordered bodies to be nailed to posts. A dozen this week, a dozen the week before, and a dozen the week before that, and so on. Not even for any crime, but because the Tyrant's god demanded sacrifice. Those who committed crimes were flayed and hanged. The Tyrant was ageless, and for fifty years every attempt at an uprising had been quelled with fire raining from the sky, with demons that came out of the walls and poisoned the waters. The Tyrant saw all, knew all, had all the power. The Tyrant believed he would live forever, and why wouldn't he?

The Tyrant didn't need to kill his own children when he murdered other peoples' children to sow despair. The Tyrant simply didn't have children. Lots of people didn't have children.

But it seemed there was some small, upside-down truth to the story after all.

Almost a year ago, Matias the Elder, the Savior, lay on his deathbed and drew his son and heir close.

His heart was failing, the physicians agreed. He'd packed several lifetimes in his short one, and the effort had caught up with him at last. Even dying, his father had an almost supernatural self-possession. His gaze was steady, and though his thin bony hands shook, they gripped his son's fiercely. The

younger Matias knelt by his father's side and quietly prayed for another year of life. Another week. Anything. But his father's breath rasped. Every movement of his lungs was an effort.

"I'm sorry, boy. I failed you."

"Da, no—"

"Oh yes." He chuckled roughly, then coughed. His son helped him sip a bit of water. "Loose threads, you know."

Haltingly, every word a struggle, the dying king told the story to his heir.

In Samarta's taverns and around its campfires, it was said that Matias's coup succeeded because he was immune to the Tyrant's dark power. The Tyrant couldn't control him or hurt him. If anyone could defeat him, it would be Matias the Mouse, who could move quietly, unseen, and murder the Tyrant in his own bed. And so he did. While his followers secured the rest of the palace, Matias got past the guards, entered his chamber, and confronted the Tyrant by himself. They fought, but the Tyrant's magic fell uselessly away from him. Matias ended him, then and there.

But there was a secret behind the tales. This was what had really happened: Matias found the Tyrant on the floor, weeping, aging before his time, hands stiffening, hair turning white. Some strange magic at work, but not Matias's.

As Matias grabbed hold of him and put a dagger to his throat, the Tyrant himself explained: any child of his would, at the moment of its birth, inherit his power. He murdered his concubines before any children could be born. He would live forever—as long as he had no heir to take his place. But now, somewhere, somehow, a pregnancy had been hidden from him and a child had been born. He'd lost his power; his eternal life was gone.

Matias had prepared for a fight, but killing the Tyrant turned out to be simple. Almost pathetic. He wasn't proud of slaughtering a shriveled, weeping old man in his own bedchamber.

In secret, he looked for the child, who must have been smuggled out of the palace. That loose thread, still hanging. He wanted to tie it off before he died, before his boy—his wise, quiet, earnest boy, so much smarter and better than him, with no blood on his hands—had to deal with the problem. But he failed.

He'd waited, watching for a child with the Tyrant's power to appear. He taught his son that the city's safety was never guaranteed. Finally, at last, he told his son why. He passed on his title, his crown, whatever power protected him. And he passed on his fears.

Matias had begun to think his father must have been mistaken. But then they'd found the dead woman whose child had lived.

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The pieces together told a story that shone plain as torchlight before them.

"If Nelli had told, if Garan had told, if my father had told—you could have gone after the child. The Tyrant's Heir. And then what?" Matias chuckled, shaking his head.

Unish said, "If the child was a threat, we would have known by now. Surely."

"How do we find it, after all this time?" Nelli asked with an edge of desperation, as if after all this time the coup could still fail.

Matias let out a short, harsh laugh. "Line up every single person of the right age in the whole city and ask them who their parents are? Like something out of a fairy tale?" No one else laughed.

"I should have stopped them," Garan murmured, finally draining his cup.

"I think you did right to let them go," Matias said. And turned to Fel, the girl who had gone unnoticed, as if some charm protected her. "You have such a look of wonder in your eyes. Is this really so amazing?"

“I... I didn’t believe her until now. Until *just* now,” she said.

“Will you tell us the story?” Matias spoke gently. He had a feeling. An odd little feeling. An instinct inherited from his father, perhaps.

She swallowed, as if trying to find a voice. She could probably use some wine—she was the only one who hadn’t had any. Her hands shook and she set the jug at her feet. She looked at Garan and said, “Sasan. The woman you saw fleeing with the baby was Sasan. The woman in the closet was Felice. My mother.”

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### The Tyrant’s Heir’s Tale

Fel remembered being sequestered as a young child. She remembered the closet-sized shrine hidden behind a doorway where a few bitter folk gathered under full moons to chant rites in another language. And she remembered, when she was six or seven, running away from the small lodge where they lived to steal sweet rolls from the baker’s booth by the Dove Square well. Not really steal, she found out later, when she began sweeping up there for coppers. They were yesterday’s leftovers and Marj left them out on purpose for the children, as long as they shared. It became a game, to see how long she could keep

away from Sasan. After a year or so Sasan stopped going after her. She wasn't young.

Fel learned that if she came home by nightfall, and if she came to the monthly ceremonies at the dank little shrine, Sasan wouldn't chase after her and Fel could do what she liked during the day. Sasan was oddly deferential.

So much Fel didn't understand then, that had just now become clear.

Now, Fel suspected that one of the reasons she was so good at hiding from Sasan was that she had some of that old hidden power. Sasan must have known and was thrilled for reasons she wouldn't explain.

Fel grew up. She got a job sweeping up at the baker's in the morning, and afternoons she worked at the inn next door, cooking and mending. Sasan found out and was horrified, muttering about how Fel was meant for better, but would never say what better was. Fel liked being in the city, she liked meeting people, liked the bards that came and played for coins, liked stealing away to the alley to kiss them sometimes. She liked the city's shrines, not at all like Sasan's dark and dingy closet. The other shrines were full of light and flowers and birdsong. The shrine to Elinsa, the spirit of water that rose up from the ground, had cages full of parrots that could be bribed to tell fortunes with fruit and biscuits. All the other shrines

were newly built, gleaming, not more than a generation old, and Fel had never thought to wonder why. She loved Sasan, for all that Sasan was strange and wouldn't go out and cursed everything about Samarta that Fel loved. She had raised Fel, and Fel owed her love.

Then last year King Matias died. King Matias, called Matias the Savior, and also Matias the Mouse by those who loved him, was deeply mourned. He had saved them from the hated Tyrant.

But Sasan told a story about fleeing from the palace with a baby in a basket. About the concubine who had hidden herself so the Tyrant wouldn't know she was pregnant. Her labor started the day before the coup and had gone poorly. A bad omen, surely.

The midwife—Sasan—was the concubine's mother. Fel's grandmother. She believed her granddaughter could be queen in her own right, with even more power than her father, and so fled and raised her in secret.

Hearing all this, Fel gathered she should have been excited and proud—rightful Queen of Samarta, yes? Now that the Usurper was dead, she could use her father's power to retake the throne.

But all she could think about was her poor mother.

She didn't believe Sasan. Not a word of the outlandish story. But the chants from Sasan's weird cult came back to Fel, in the language she realized she did understand. They spoke of demands for blood and promises of immortality.

Fel still didn't believe. Didn't want to. Her grandmother was mad—

There was a voice that spoke inside her mind sometimes, that whispered, *hide here*. It warned her when Sasan was about to discover her. Told her which boys were safe to kiss and which wanted to hurt her and should be avoided or punished. Now, that voice said, *Yes, it's time. You are queen. Do this thing and you will have the world.*

Instead, Fel ran away.

She moved out of the lodge and into a room that a couple of the tavern girls shared. Sasan went after her. Set fire to the place; Fel discovered it quickly, no one was hurt. Then Sasan went into the square by the bakery and ranted that Fel was the city's true queen, that she had the Tyrant's magic and would rain terror on them all. Mortified, Fel hurried her home. She was ready to make excuses—but no one took Sasan seriously, so excuses turned out not to be necessary. The neighborhood murmured at how the old woman had finally lost her mind, wasn't it sad? Then, just a couple of months ago, Sasan died of a stroke. She had killed herself with her raving, folk said.

Fel fled to the other side of the city, where she didn't know anyone and the accents were different and she had nothing but what she wore and a few copper coins.

And then she found a job, a good job with people who seemed kind. But she didn't know that they would've killed her if they'd known who she was.

\* \* \*

“Honestly, truly, I didn't believe her. I thought...” Her shoulders slumped. “I don't know what I thought.”

Matias glanced around the fire again, waiting to see what the others would do. Would they still think they needed to kill her? “What's the voice telling you now?”

“That I could poison the wine and murder the Usurper, just that easily.”

Several of them dropped their cups, poured wine onto the ground, gasped.

Matias took another drink.

“Sire,” Garan warned, and yes, his hand was on his dagger.

“I'm safe,” Matias said. “I am my father's son. The Tyrant's Heir cannot hurt me.” He wasn't sure that was entirely true. He was working on faith, now, but he believed this young woman wouldn't kill him, anymore than he would kill her.

She said, “I think... I think the voice might have brought me here on purpose, to get me close to you.”

“But you have a choice,” Matias said.

“I think the Tyrant—my father—must have, too, and chose to be what he was.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “I don’t want to be him. Whatever else I am, I’m not him.”

Garan chuckled. “Sire, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, I told you and your father a hundred times to get rid of those cultists. I told you they were trouble.”

“I see no trouble,” Matias said simply. “Fel. Are you going to incite a coup to try to overthrow me and restore the old regime?”

“No!” she exclaimed, horrified. “I don’t want to be queen! I want—”

“To serve wine and sweep floors in some caravanserai?” Nelli snorted. “I don’t believe you.”

Fel glared, revealing a spark of the Tyrant’s bloodline there. A determination that would rise up when pressed. “I want to be left alone. That’s all.” Nelli, who had a spine of iron, looked away, chagrined.

“Sire, this could be a trick,” Garan said.

“I don’t think it is.” Garan wouldn’t understand what it was like to have such expectations piled on at a young age.

“Would you slit my throat?” Fel asked Garan. “Do what you regret not doing all those years ago?”

Garan thought a moment. Actually had to think about it, in case any of them suspected he'd gone soft. "No. No, I don't want to slit anyone's throat."

"Please, don't tell anyone about this," Fel begged, glancing around the circle, catching the gaze of each person, just as Matias had done. A natural charisma, there. "People would be so afraid of me if they knew that any part of him still lived. Don't tell."

Matias said, "I command that this secret be kept. Agreed?" No one in that rare circle made a sign of protest.

Fel brushed off her skirt and gave a determined nod. "I know I can't stay here. Thank you, Nelli, for taking me in when you did. Goodbye." She started toward the courtyard gate.

"Fel," Matias said. "Stay a moment. It's the middle of the night, and you don't even have a cloak. At least wait until morning, if you're going to charge into the unknown."

Fel hesitated, listening.

"My lord, she can't stay," Nelli said. "Not after... after everything."

"And you can't just let her walk away," Garan said. "Not with her power—"

"She's a free citizen of Samarta and can come and go as she likes. Whatever else she is," Matias said. He set down his cup and sighed. "I need to think. I need to think, away from here."

These folk, his father's oldest, dearest friends, gaped at him, faces bronzed in firelight. "I still owe you everything, and you've never asked for any favors. I'll come back for the wine and company. But maybe not for some time. Fel?" She blinked back at him hopefully. "Let's find you a place to stay, at least for the night. If you trust me." He knew how to deal with her: keep her close, where he could watch her. Persuade her. Make a friend of her.

"All right. Yes."

They walked out together. Behind them, those gathered at the fire remained silent. He wondered what they would say about him when he was gone.

Of course his guards were startled at his new companion. Matias hadn't ever been one to pick up temporary companionship at inns in secret. She *was* pretty.

Matias gave them a wry look. "Berol, Pen, this is Fel. She's the daughter of an old friend who needs a place to stay for a bit. I know there's room at the palace."

"Yes, sir."

"Old friend?" Fel asked skeptically.

Matias shrugged. They walked, the guards a pace behind them, and it felt... fine. It was not so late; folk were still about, leaving taverns and sweeping streets.

"You walk," Fel said. "No horses or litters or—"

“I like the air. I like to see the city.”

“Ah.”

They spoke of little things. Matias revealed he'd spent part of his childhood at the Square of the Geese. She knew it—she liked the shrine there and sometimes bought eggs from one of the stalls. He asked if she knew of the woman who cooked spiced meat pies a block up, near the watch post. She did. They soon came through the city walls and up the wide street that led to the palace. The Tyrant's processions used to come this way. He wondered if she knew.

At one point he said, thinking out loud, “What are the chances that you'd be born on the very night my father most needed your father to lose his power?”

“Only the gods know,” she said, with an air of truth.

Matias suspected his father knew how very, very lucky they'd all been.

“What should I do with you, then?” he asked her. “Maybe I should bring you home and have you stand in a corner, to whisper at me that I am mortal.”

“No,” she said. “That place makes my back itch thinking of it. Besides, it sounds dull. I like to bake. I like people.”

“There's a bakery near the palace that might need an apprentice.”

“The one with the date rolls? I know it.” They were almost at the palace, and she hung back. “I don’t think I want to go in there. I can... feel it.” She shivered.

“We haven’t cremated her yet,” Matias offered. Felice, her name was Felice. “We shrouded her and took her to the Matron’s Shrine, for prayers. She’s hard to look at in her state, but she’s there, if you’d like to visit her.”

Fel wiped her eyes, but more tears slipped silently. “I think I might. Yes. Can we go now?”

Childbearing, and the need for prayers related to it, so often happened at night. So yes, the shrine was open at all hours. “Yes, of course.”

He walked with her as the taverns shut down, the lanterns were shuttered, and the city tucked itself in for the night.

What would my father think of this, Matias wondered, and decided it didn’t matter.

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## THE LIGHT OF SETTING SUNS

by Samuel Chapman

It is the shared birthday of the isle of Barradwyth. As a gift, Cyfris has promised his granddaughter Cydovan the one story he has never told her.

They are sitting on the balcony of their home on Barradwyth Station, overlooking a street paved with mosaic tile. Cyfris knows that Cydovan has been planning to ask him for his story ever since he refused on her birthday last year. She strikes with clockwork precision. First, she gives him a gift of two strands of glass beads to braid into his long grey hair, then pounces while she has him in a good mood.

Cyfris asks Dovan if she would not prefer another story, any other at all. Perhaps Jilian the Bold, who once parlayed at a conference of three sea dragons? Or Skadlaw's journey through the overworld, even though it takes the whole evening to tell?

"Absolutely not," says Dovan. "You've gotten out of this for eight years, and I'm tired of hearing you say *next time*. I want *your* story."

Though a veteran tale-teller, Cyfris has kept this one back out of fear. But things have changed. Several times in the past

year, he has caught Cydovan sneaking down to the docks to watch the airships take off. She stops each night to watch the sunset, broom or charcoal or food frozen in her hand as she stares at the red-lit horizon. If Cyfris waits another year, he will be too late.

Luckily, he has devised a way to tell it safely. Or so he hopes. *No ship is unchanged by the voyage*, he has thought many times today, *and no story is unchanged by the listener*.

It's quiet on the balcony for the first time today. Everyone is home to sleep off the day of merriment and prepare for the evening festival. Though he and Cydovan share a building with two other families, they have a floor to themselves, enclosed in a rare little bubble of late-afternoon peace.

"Bring us both some plum juice from the cold cellar," Cyfris tells Dovan. "It'll be lovely in this heat."

Dovan loves plum juice so much that she doesn't complain about this particular act of stalling. Cyfris has his plan, but he needs a moment more to fortify himself. He must tell this story to save her, but if she sees far enough, it could drive her away forever. And she sees very far. How could his own flesh and blood not?

Dovan returns with two clay mugs brimming with fragrant, sugary purple. Cyfris asks her, "Are you sitting comfortably?"

She plops down and gives a commanding nod.

“This story begins long ago. Long, long in the past, when I was a young man just come of age. It is a story...”

He pauses, to lure her in. Though this story may destroy his family, he’s still going to tell it right.

“...of the world before airships.”

\* \* \*

Once upon a time, seaships with red sails landed on untouched shores and disgorged men clad in red armor. Corrupted by hatred, they desired all they could see, and they could see far.

At that time, I had a mother, a father, and an older sister. They knew the red ships were coming, because their emperor was a *tahu-ar*, to whose hand the ocean yielded like a tame cat. I was old enough to understand this too, but I did not want to, and I remained young enough to believe that my wanting could make a difference. I had just devised a new method of mending fishing nets with hot wax to make them last longer, and I wanted to be left alone to test and refine my theory. When I thought of the invaders at all, it was to resent them for interfering in my experiments.

Then we sighted the red sails. My sister and father and mother took their stout black staves from beside the door and joined the islanders streaming up the mountain. “We will seek

Ap's protection," my mother said, though haltingly, since we did not know Ap to be reliable.

Her fears were well-founded. The men in red armor found us in the mountain caves. They slew my mother when she raised her staff against them. They slew my father when he would not let go of her body. All this I learned later. I was not permitted to see.

When the fighting was done, the men came to where my sister guarded me at the back of the cavern. They asked her: "Will you serve at the pleasure of the Scarlet Emperor?" She told them: "May you lose your way. May you drown where there is no light." So they slew her too. This I did see.

They came to me and repeated the question. "Will you serve at the pleasure of the Scarlet Emperor?"

I could find no words to reply.

"These people are impossible," said one man. "How are we supposed to bring back a live one?"

"Let's just take this one," said the other. "He didn't say no."

I tried to say no, to scream it, but the men carried gleaming swords and the word would not come. My life had a new meaning: to keep those swords away from me. I would say (or not say) or do (or not do) whatever it took to maintain that goal. This philosophy bore much fruit over the next few years.

That is how I entered the service of the Scarlet Emperor.

\* \* \*

“What did he want you to do?” asks Dovan.

“I don’t know,” Cyfris replies. “I never met him.”

Dovan sticks out a tongue stained purple with plum juice.

“You know what I mean.”

“At first it was my knowledge of the shipwright’s craft that kept me alive. They needed skilled men. Their own kept getting themselves killed in raids. But then the Emperor found a less costly way to expand his domain.”

“How?”

“At the lighthouse, have they taught you how new islands get their people?”

Dovan goes every other day to the lighthouse near Barradwyth’s harbor. The keeper teaches the village children how food grows, how to batten windows against a storm, how to prevent death during childbirth. Nor does she neglect the tales of the old navigators.

“Someone must always arrive first,” Dovan says. “Voyagers take a ship and ride against the wind until half of their food and water is gone. If they don’t find an island, they coast home. If they do, they land their traveling party, and if they can stay for five years, it’s a new home island. They chart it on the maps

and let anybody come live there. And because there are always new islands, there must always be voyagers...”

“Yes, you’ve got the idea,” says Cyfris quickly. Her eyes are lighting up in a way that leaves him farther from his goal, and he sorrows at what he must say next. Was it not the duty of all adults to fight for a world where children could be naive? By telling this story, was he failing her?

No, to let her ship out aboard a trade aerial—that would be failing her. Cyfris steels himself to continue.

“You are absolutely correct about how we people islands today,” he tells Dovan. “But it was not so in the days of the Scarlet Emperor.”

\* \* \*

I was aboard a red ship, one of six that had set out from the Scarlet Reefs. We were heading north by east. I had not wanted to join them, had protested that I was too valuable in the imperial shipyards. I’d just taught the Emperor’s captains some subtle points to stretch the mechanical advantage of their blocks and tackles so they could crew a ship with fewer men. But eventually I had said yes, to keep swords in sheaths. I believe someone feared my influence would grow too fast.

We sailed across rough seas, dodging coral towers, more than once nearly lodging on a crystal reef. We frightened off a tribe of pinns with powder bombs and crept past a sleeping

leviathan with as little sail as we could fly. All the time, our stores dwindled, and I held out hope that we would need to turn around. Perhaps these seas were empty. Perhaps I would sail about dark waters until the death of the Scarlet Emperor, if a *tahu-ar* could die.

But then, on my watch, I sighted land. If it became known I had seen it and not alerted the captain, I would face harsh punishment, and the outcome would not change. So I called “land above!” though my throat fought against me.

We hove to in the waters beneath the island, gazing up to where it hovered a thousand paces into the sky. The captain lit the burner of the ladder balloon and let it float up to the island rim, unfurling a rope ladder as it went. When it had lodged on a rocky cliff face, he turned to me and said, “Climb.”

I did not want to. I feared that island more than I feared the leviathan. I wanted to be home in the shadow of fickle Ap. But home was gone. There was just this boat, and the captain whose hand was on his riding crop, and the ladder.

“Will no-one accompany me?” I asked.

“We’ll be with you in spirit,” the captain told me with a leer.

“Most first settlers land with their whole village.”

“Then think how much more honor you’ll win going alone.”

One of the crew pushed a rolled-up red flag into my hands. “In five years, we’ll return,” the captain said. “If we see that flag unfurled, we’ll take possession of this island in the Emperor’s name. If not, we’ll blanket it with solar fire until no shrub stands.” He laughed. “Either way, you’ll be on it. If it’s a bad isle, you might not want to be alive when we return.”

There was nothing left to do but climb.

\* \* \*

“How did you climb a thousand paces straight up?” asks Dovan.

“It’s not such a long distance,” Cyfris says. “Perhaps by today’s standards, now that we have airships, but pioneers in the old days climbed longer, with heavier packs.”

“Grandpa,” Dovan replies, in a tone acutely disappointed with him, “you shouldn’t try so hard not to tell me things.”

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t tell me about the Emperor’s Court or most of the voyage. You nearly skipped when your family got killed. Now you won’t tell me how you climbed the tallest ladder in the world!” She thumps her fists on her knees. “Why is half your story missing?”

Cyfris layers on annoyance to cover any traces of fear. “I am telling it all according to the storyteller’s craft. Do you want to hear it or not?”

“Yes,” Dovan says quietly. Her need for her one lost story has chastened her. Cyfris hopes this will keep her from noticing all the other things he’s going to leave out.

\* \* \*

How did I climb? The same way the water falls.

The water is not given a choice, and so it refuses to countenance the idea of a choice. Otherwise it might lose its head one day and decide to fall straight up. And then where would we be, with dry rivers and empty basins?

I refused to know I could stop climbing, and thus I could climb. I would find out soon that everything on the island worked like that. It didn’t take reality as literally as some other islands.

I didn’t feel the ache in my limbs until I reached the top of the cliff and collapsed in a meadow of dafflowers. When I looked up, I saw...

Paradise.

And what is paradise?

I saw emerald-green trees blooming with flowers of white and gold. I felt a warm wind carrying the scent of honey. I heard water trickling from a few different places and one cascade tumbling down a cliff in front of me. I walked a gently rising path that beckoned me farther in (I did not think yet about whose feet had worn it).

None of that was paradise.

Paradise was when I sank to my knees in a soft bed of grass, knowing the swords could not touch me here, and wept all the tears I had held back since the slaughter of Ap. And even though the inhabitant of the island heard me sobbing, when I would have preferred her to meet me strong and vigorous—well, she was paradise too.

Your grandmother was as wild as the woods when I first met her. The first thing I saw of her was her eyes: green as the trees, and glaring straight at me.

“Who are you?” she asked. “How did you come here?”

“By boat and balloon,” I stammered. “You must have seen them.”

But the boat would be long gone, and the balloon would have run out of gas by now and sunk into the ocean, taking the ladder with it. The Scarlet Empire did not build things to last. I knew that well from my time working on their ships.

She sniffed. “The goddess placed me here to protect her spring. You must be from some rival god. I tell you now, outsider, that you will never taste her water.”

I pleaded with her to give me some water or I would surely die. She said she would consider letting me drink from the other, less-sacred waters on the island, for the right price. I dug through my pack in search of something that might placate her.

Buried at the bottom, beneath knives, rope, and the other tools of survival, was the red flag. Remembrance poured forth from its bloody fibers. In five years, this beautiful isle would be destroyed, whether by boot and sword or by fire. And I would be the one to decide which.

Your grandmother claimed the red flag as her price. She showed me a clean waterfall to drink from, fruits and mushrooms I could eat, and a cave where I could sleep. Then she bounded off up the hill before I could turn around. I watched her until she slipped out of sight in a drifting cloud.

Only after gorging myself on fruits and mushrooms, and curling up to sleep in the cave, did I suspect that she might have poisoned me. But it didn't trouble my sleep. I had already begun to trust her.

It took much of a season before I finally learned your grandmother's weakness: she loved to teach. Whenever I saw her crossing my path in a meadow, or walked beneath a tree she was resting in, I would ask her one question. She could never resist answering.

“Do you trap game in the woods here?”

“I wouldn't. Animals here are too smart to be caught, and smart enough to remember that you tried.”

“Can you eat dafflower bulbs?”

“Don’t. You’ll vomit. But you can boil them into a paste and smear it on your skin to prevent sunburn.”

“What does the goddess’s spring do?”

“It gives life.”

“Where is it?”

“In the heart of the island. No, you can’t see it.”

“Why don’t you trust me?”

“You came from an enemy god.”

That last one came as we sat together by a stream, watching Aratn the near sun set in a silence I had thought was companionable. It broke me in an unexpected way. Before I knew what I was doing, I had pulled off my worn shirt and turned to show her the scars on my back. The skin was a mass of scabs and lumps, scoured and unnatural.

“I was sent here by the man who gave me these. He used a riding crop, so sharp he wouldn’t strike his beasts with it, but I was good enough to taste it. Do you think I have the slightest loyalty to the place I came from? That I wouldn’t rather stay here with you, no matter what I felt when I arrived?”

She was silent for a long time. I turned around to see her staring at the stream, watching a water-strider skate.

“Your evil god could have given you scars to win my sympathy,” she said, but she didn’t sound convinced.

I woke the next morning to see her waiting outside my cave. “I’ll take you to the spring,” she said. “The goddess can decide if you’re worthy.”

The path to the spring led farther up the mountain than I had dared to venture before. I followed your grandmother through the cloud forest until we broke into the clear-skied world above. After several arcs of walking, we came to a place where two streams trickled out of a hole in the mountainside, framing a slick path of glittering granite. I went inside alone, feeling her stare at my back all the way.

Moss covered the walls of the cave. It shone an iridescent green when I entered, but under my gaze, swaths of it changed to a light blue, like the shallow water of a lagoon. I have always liked blue.

I straightened up and stepped forward, carefully, for I feared shattering the silence. Clay squished between my toes as I neared the spring. A glow, with no source I could discern, shone from beneath the clear water, which rippled though the air was still. Wisps of light whipped across the mossy walls. It was a sunlit glade in miniature, trapped in a grotto no wider than two of my armspans.

Because I couldn’t think of what else to do, I knelt down. Clay caked on my knees. I cupped my hands and took a sip of

the water. It felt cool on my lips, a coolness that persisted all the way down my throat.

When I emerged back into the sunlight, she was still waiting. “I don’t understand,” I said. “Am I worthy?”

“Did you drink?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because the spring was there.”

“Then you’re worthy,” she announced. “If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have drunk. The goddess likes to keep her tests simple. There’s less room for error that way.”

“But worthy of what?” I enjoyed going around in circles with her, but this would go on endlessly if I let it. “What does the spring do?”

She watched me for a moment, no doubt trying to decide how much I’d understand. Finally she said, “Everything on the island is what you expect it to be. Rivers run. Hills roll. Mountains rise. And water gives life, that spring most of all. What that means for you is yet to be known.”

I was trying hard to understand, so I didn’t notice that she was moving closer and closer to me. I panicked. I did not know what kind of touch to expect. All I could think was to tell the truth.

“I’m not from an evil god,” I said, “but I was brought here by men who are. They’ll be back here in five years, either to colonize this place or destroy it. I’m sorry,” I finished limply.

It would be impossible for me to convey the strength I saw in her just then. Her faith in her island was so great that the news hardly made a ripple on the surface of her beautiful face.

“There must be a third option,” she said. “We have five years to find it.”

Then she took me in her arms.

Lying that night in a bower behind a waterfall, she told me she had been curious since she first saw me weeping for my freedom in the clearing. She wanted to know what I had left behind to find such joy in solitude. She traced her fingers over my scars, and I shivered, thinking the wounds had not yet healed until that night.

When the far sun passed from the Vine into the Fox, she began to swell with child. When it was near the Vine again, I beheld my son.

This was not your father, who was born after my escape. By then, I was already the inventor of airships and a different man altogether. This child was a son of paradise. He was the life the spring gave me.

We named him Asgellonghyber, called Asgell. From the day he was born, we walked with him through the forest, letting

him taste the leaves and fruits, smear the juice on his face, run his little hands over the bark. We loved him to distraction, like he loved the island, and so our love for the land and the goddess and each other multiplied.

I wish I could remember more of those days. They were the finest in my life, until I had your father. I just remember Asgell's hands sticky with plum juice, and his brown eyes, her exact eyes.

\* \* \*

“Wait!”

“Dovan, I have told you, if you must interrupt—”

“And I told *you* to stop telling lies! I want a *true* story!”

She is leaning forward, threatening him with her glare like a fencer with a sword.

“You said she had green eyes,” Dovan accuses him. “Then you said brown. Which is it?”

“It has been so long, and I am old. I cannot remember...”

“You wouldn't forget,” she says with certainty. “You loved her. You wouldn't forget the color of her eyes.”

An incredible silence ensues. The harbor deafens Cyfris with its shipboard bells and hawkers' cries. He lets the quiet stretch on long enough for Dovan to know she has caught him.

This is the critical moment. He has often marveled at the way his creations of sail and rigging unfold like sleight-of-hand

tricks: nothing seems like it's going to work until suddenly, everything does. Each component has its place and works in its proper order. This story is the greatest machine he has ever built. If it unfolds correctly, it will protect his granddaughter without teaching her to loathe him. But it's never been more delicate than it is right now.

"I have so little left, except you," he says. "I didn't want you to think ill of me."

"Grandpa, I don't. I couldn't."

*Young people, Cyfris thinks. Always speaking too soon.*

"Then let's go back a ways."

Dovan settles back in her chair, ready to listen.

"This time," he lies, "I will tell the whole truth."

\* \* \*

The first part of the truth is: there was no intermediary between the goddess and myself, the island and myself. I fell in love with Paradise. She gave me the answers I sought. As with many relationships, ours eventually produced a child.

The whole truth is: I made Asgell.

I took the clay from the goddess's spring. Born from her earth, her water, it was bones and spirit both. I shaped it into a child. Her spring gave life, and the child grew.

I was bereft until he gave his first shout. He was the only reason I didn't throw myself off the cliff my first year there.

It never seemed strange to him that he had no mother. For all he knew, every child started life on the floor of a cave. The only odd thing about him was that he'd never been a baby. He came to life as a child of four, perhaps because I used too much clay.

Otherwise, he was like any other child. When he ate too much fruit, he got sick. When he tripped, he scraped his knee. He nearly stopped his father's heart with his love of falling off high places. He'd go limp in midair, make a soft landing with his limbs pinwheeling, then stand, looking to me for applause.

The time wore away. Those years were so pleasant it hurts me now to think on them. I built a hut for Asgell—before, I had thought nothing of sleeping on the ground—and we did our chores to maintain it. I taught him letters and numbers, and how to use the stars to always find his way back home. I even tried teaching him some of the shipwright's trade, but he couldn't get his head around it.

One day, I woke at dawn to see Asgell using a sharp stone to scratch a new mark in the calendar we kept by the door. He waved when he saw me blinking at him. "That's twelve hundred, father."

"Ah, yes. Very fine counting, Asgell." I rolled over. "Now, if you don't mind..."

He dropped his stone and ran to the side of my cot. “Twelve hundred makes four years! It’s the isle’s birthday, just like you taught me.”

“Twelve hundred...” I had made Asgell at the end of my first season on Paradise. I’d taught him how everyone from an island celebrates their birthday on the same day, and that the day he was born was our isle’s birthday.

We had less than a year.

From the bottom of the trunk that now held my possessions, the red flag called to me. I was no closer to a solution. A heroine from my stories would have burnt the island herself to keep it from the hands of the enemy, but that option had long been closed to me. I might feed myself to the flames. Not Asgell.

One bright morning, I watched a frigate bird skim the ocean far below me, and I wondered. Asgell returned from fishing to find me still sitting there and staring.

“Asgell,” I asked him, “do you remember how ships work?”

“I think so.” He laid the big trout he’d caught on the rock beside me. “The air pushes one way on the sails, and the water pushes the other way on the...the...”

“The keel. Can you think of any reason that wouldn’t work in the air?”

“Umm.” He thought. “Too heavy?”

“Yes, but if something could provide lift...”

“Whatever you say, father.” Asgell set to work gutting the trout.

I knew what I was going to do. The Scarlet Empire would come to burn the island in three seasons. But we wouldn't be there.

The lessons ended after that day. Asgell and I worked on the ship whenever we weren't busy with food or shelter. We crisscrossed the island looking for trees with rib-shaped branches. We gathered flax and wove it into linen for the sails. Asgell returned in triumph from the high caves one evening, bearing a chunk of arisite for the compass. He got dessert for dinner that night.

I saved the most important step until after the ship was nearly finished, fearful of how long the magic would last. But soon the hull and the deck were finished, and the far sun was near the Vine. We were almost out of time.

I returned to the goddess's spring, where I had not been since Asgell was born, carrying four large sacks. I filled all four, asking her blessing each time. *You raised my son from the clay, I prayed. Now raise our ship from the earth.*

Of course, in reality, her water was not lighter than air. But reality was a softer thing on Paradise.

We made our first test flight on the first day of summer. Just as I had believed it would, the ship lifted itself into the air. Its upper and lower mainsails filled to bursting. It displaced neither air nor cloud nor bird. Wherever it was, it was like it had always been there.

It took some practice before I could control two sets of sails at once, the one above and the one below. This wasn't like the airships today, sleek and buoyant; we slapped ours together with pitch and spit. But soon I was circling the island, laughing, while Asgell raced alongside me on the beach. I ran the red flag up the mast, and we saluted it with our rear ends, pronouncing filthy curses on the Scarlet Emperor.

I should have taken him aboard on that first day. Maybe then I would have noticed something wrong. But I was so eager to get away that I announced we'd start packing instead of running another test. We would leave tomorrow. Asgell ran home to pack his favorite snacks and the arisite stone he had been so proud to find.

I didn't sleep that night. I sat on the end of Asgell's cot and let him lay his head in my lap. He'd be too big to do that soon.

"Father?" he asked before dawn, startling me out of a doze. "What will our new home be like?"

"I don't know," I said. "We may not find one right away. That's why there's so much food on the ship."

“I mean when we find one. What will that be like?”

“It’s hard to say. Every island is different. The one I came from wasn’t very much like Paradise at all.”

“Oh.” I felt him clutch the stone tighter. “But if they can be worse, they can be better, right?”

“Yes,” I said through the tightness in my chest. “That’s a very brave thing to say.”

“I can’t wait to see them,” he mumbled. “I’m going to stay up all night and be ready to launch at dawn.” Then he fell back asleep. I stayed up for the both of us.

I checked the horizon the next morning. No red sails. But I wouldn’t risk another day here.

The ship lifted off just as lightly as it had before. Asgell clung to the railing and peered over, fascinated at the sight of his home falling away. He was everywhere at once, asking to hold the helm, checking knots, pointing out celestial landmarks as the stars faded into the purple-blue sky.

Just a few minutes later, only the Morning Triangle remained to steer by. I remember the time exactly. The instant my son fell silent.

One moment Asgell was hanging from the rigging. The next, he sat down against the mast and said that he didn’t feel well.

“It’s seasickness,” I said. “But for the air. Skysickness? We’re going to have to come up with a lot of new words.”

He didn’t answer.

“Asgell? Do you realize we’re the first people in the archipelago to ever do what we’re doing now?”

Still no answer.

“Asgell?”

I left the helm and ran to him. Or to where he had been. In his place there was a body, its skin sloughing into wet brown clay.

\* \* \*

“Grandpa, you don’t have to.” Dovan’s little hand rests inside his. Cyfris closes his fingers around it. “I know I said before that I wanted you to tell everything, but I changed my mind. You don’t need to tell this part.”

“It’s part of the story,” Cyfris murmurs. “It must be told.”

“You always told me that putting something in a story changes that thing. You don’t have to change Asgell tonight.”

He nods and squeezes her hand. “I’d like to finish, though. We’re so close to the end.”

“I’d like that too.”

\* \* \*

We had gone outside the goddess's power. An island's magic belongs to that island alone. Away from their own shores, every god and goddess is powerless.

As I stared at the mound of dead clay, I didn't notice that the buoyancy of my ship was failing. She dropped slowly enough that I was in no danger but as soon as the bottomsail dragged in the water, it was over.

I hardly noticed until the water nearly lapped at the rails. I was trying to gather Asgell's clay together, as though that could call him home. By the time the remains of the first-ever airship washed up on a basalt reef, there wasn't enough of him left to hold in one hand.

The first people to find me were a pair of gatherers combing the reef for clams. I looked up, my face stinging and raw, and asked if the Scarlet Fleet was near. They looked at each other. "Where you been, wanderer?" asked one.

The Scarlet Empire was no more. The Emperor had died two years after I was marooned. His heirs had murdered each other in the halls of his palace while petty dukes and rebel leaders split the islands between them. Nobody remembers their names now except ysgolers and cartomancers.

I realized then that I had no home except for the one I had just left. I spent a time on the reef I don't much care to remember, eating sorrow and drinking salt. Once I could walk

and work again, I made my way to Ash Aris, which had just re-established a government under its first-founder families. There, I built an airship that worked without magic, and I grew rich building many more. When I had enough coin, I returned to Paradise.

That's the one name from my story, other than mine, which everyone remembers. You see, in the dialect I grew up speaking on Ap, the word for Paradise is Barradwyth.

I longed to escape Paradise, but the moment I left, I wished for nothing more than to be home. That I could return—not just return, but transform my paradise into a home for you—has been the greatest kindness of my life.

I laid the first stones of Barradwyth Station with my own hands. I invited other settlers and watched it grow into a thriving town. I met a woman, your true grandmother, and gave birth to your father. And when your parents went down off Sothus when you were just a babe, I took you in.

So you see, my story is also yours. There is properly only one story, which we tell in pieces as it suits us. You may ask why this piece suits me, at this time, to which I can only answer: because you wanted me to tell it. There is little I would not do for your happiness.

\* \* \*

Dovan sits back when Cyfris finishes. She sits up straight and rests her head on the back of the chair, imitating a pose of his.

“I can see why you didn’t want to tell that story,” she says.

He bows his head. “I’m glad you understand. You were very forgiving of all the ways I tried to make it easier on myself.”

Dovan studies the stone floor of the balcony. “I’m sorry I made you do it.”

“Don’t be. The story you don’t want to tell is the one the world needs most of all. I’m glad it’s out in the world now.”

Dovan nods slowly, but Cyfris knows she’ll feel bad all evening if he doesn’t distract her. “I think the great nap is over,” he says, gesturing to a lamplighter working her way down the street. “Time for the evening festival. Wash up, and we’ll go visit.”

Dovan disappears into her room.

Cyfris listens to her moving around inside. She is life incarnate, a little bird, a ball of fire. She makes him wish he could have gone farther, pulled the curtain off the story’s last secrets, but it’s not yet the time.

*One day, Cyfris thinks, I will tell her.* He’ll explain that she never knew her parents because she never had them. That she was born in the mountain cave, a place yet sacred to the

Goddess Barradwyth. That she can't leave her home island just yet, because Cyfris still hasn't solved the problem that took Asgell away.

He turns to face south. Aratn the near sun is setting, painting the southern sky purple and gold. Cydovan is bewitched by the light of setting suns, but if his story has convinced her that her joys and duties lie at home, she will not turn into clay. He will do it right this time. Until he figures it out, she must be content in the paradise he's built for her. A town of lights and music, mosaics and dances and glass beads for your hair.

But when he goes to fetch Cydovan for the festival, she has abandoned her plum juice to turn warm on the windowsill. He pauses behind the door, fearful. Dovan drags her nails across her arm, leaving red streaks, and then looks under her fingernails, as though checking to see if clay has gathered there.

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## BETWEEN BLADES

by Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko

### **I: LESHIN**

The sand underfoot was still fresh with ripples where it had been raked to hide the blood. The sea rushed in over Leris's feet, the wave in the water meeting the waves in the sand and smoothing out, inch by inch, the remaining evidence of the first bout.

“Ready?”

It was the first word Gerthe had spoken all day. The sun was just shy of its peak, bearing down on the spectators and the competitors in equal measure. It would have been different, in a proper amphitheatre: the two pairs of combatants would have regarded each other from the shaded safety of the tunnels, sizing the others up and taking the time to discuss strategy. But this was the archipelago, and one of the rimward isles besides, and the closest amphitheatre was a week's sail away on Leshin. Here there was nothing but a patch of sand, bounded on one side by temporary wooden stands and on the other by the ocean.

Sweat made the nape of Leris's neck itch, and she reached back to adjust the knot of her sarong. "Don't gotta be ready."

Gerthe grunted. She was wearing a gladiator's standard padded leathers, but she stood motionless nonetheless; if the heat ever got to her, Leris had not yet had the pleasure of seeing it happen. "A delay," Gerthe said, jerking her head at the stands. The master of the arena, who should have been announcing them by now, was jabbing animatedly at a sheet of paper in his assistant's hands.

Leris stepped closer to Gerthe, seeking her shadow. It didn't help. "Looks like."

Across the sand, their opponents appeared to be debating something. A good sign. Most teams developed a default approach after a few months together. If they hadn't even decided their roles, they couldn't be much use to each other.

"Swords," Gerthe said.

"Could be. Don't much matter."

That was their secret: they had no decisions to make, no strategies to adapt and counter-adapt on the fly. It made things easier. It meant Leris could forgo armour and wear a sarong. Easier did not mean better, but she told herself it was. She and Gerthe had fought together for years and in that time become very, very good at what they did. Who was to say their strategy was unwise when it worked?

Then the master of the arena was striding out onto the sand. Suddenly Leris's breath came in short gasps, as it always did right before a bout, and she shoved nerves back down, as she always did.

"Leris a Leshin," the master called in a voice that would have failed to fill the smallest stone arena. "And Gerthe a Mnibo." The noise from the spectators intensified, shifting from impatience to sudden excitement, and the sound of the sea fell away. It was a small crowd but no less enthusiastic for it.

Leris closed her eyes as she and Gerthe strode forwards. She knew how they looked: the scrap of a woman wrapped in a patterned sarong and the tall, muscular Mniboan. They were like something out of a story, the sea-giant and the chief's daughter. Halfway to the centre, they stopped and bowed, but the master of the arena was already introducing the other team. Elsewhere there would have been more ceremony, but here in the rimward isles there was only a beach. She made herself ignore the other pair of names. She knew who they were, most like; perhaps had shared dinner with them the night before. Right now, though, they were the enemy.

Gerthe took her hand. The other team was ready; the master of the arena was withdrawing; the crowd was on its feet. It was a strangely intimate feeling, hands linked before a

hundred or more strangers; but then, it was an intimate thing they did.

The gong sounded. The nerves were gone, in their place a feral tension to the muscles holding her smile. Leris met Gerthe's eyes, split-second, and then she folded in on herself, easier than breathing, and became the spear.

Swords were paramount in Traitian culture, and it was the Traitians who had invented the gladiator games and spread them beyond the borders of their empire, and so it was called swordform. In the Empire, she knew, she would be an object of mockery—*her swordform is a spear*—but the spear did not care for such tricks of etymology, and in that moment she was it and it was her, and she knew who she was, better than she knew at any other time, even as her human senses receded until all she had left was an awareness of the ebb and flow of battle.

Gerthe had been right. Leris could tell the shapes of their opponents as water poured into a bowl could tell the shape of its receptacle. Where there had been two people there was now only one holding a short sword—the kind that, outside the arena, would have been accompanied by a small round shield. Leris felt the thrum of violence running down her haft, urging Gerthe into the fight: they had the reach, it was a good matchup, a sudden strike could end the bout before it had properly begun. Their opponents knew it too, and the moment

of hesitation as they debated whether to commit or switch swung the balance, Leris's opportunism winning out over Gerthe's caution, and they, Gerthe-wielding-Leris, were running, faster than anyone expected Gerthe alone could move, and in her mind's eye Leris could see herself, blade reflecting the sun into the eyes of the enemy.

The short sword came out of swordform, and for one crucial second there was nothing before them but two unarmed people holding hands. Leris had the brief impression of youth and nerves and tension, and then Gerthe was swinging her like a quarterstaff. Her haft connected with the young man's hand and he yelped, jerking back and letting go just as his partner became a longsword and dropped uselessly to the sand.

The bout was over then, but Leris could not resist pressing the advantage. She flew into the next blow, a low sweep that knocked their human opponent off his feet, guiding Gerthe through the motions almost before Gerthe was aware of her own body's movements, and the next, a neat clinical thrust that scored a line along the longsword's hilt. The strike threw the woman out of swordform and she lay, confused and barely even out of breath, with Leris's blade flush against her neck.

Leris's awareness faded as the tension of the fight dropped. She could imagine the proceedings well enough. The crowd would rise in appreciation of the victors. There would be

some grumbling, perhaps, that it had been over so quickly, and the same sentiment would show on the master's face as he strode forwards to declare the winners. Gerthe would hoist Leris over her shoulder and walk away, waving once in acknowledgement.

She could have seen and heard all this with human eyes and human ears, but Leris remained in swordform all through the formalities, all through the short walk to the hut they shared on the beach, until Gerthe deposited her on their bed. The loss of Gerthe's touch brought her back, and she rolled over onto her stomach, sarong tangling around her legs, and fought down the familiar wave of confusion. Everything was simple when she was the spear. There was no room for doubts. Only after, when she was human again, did she wonder if she really knew herself.

Gerthe knelt by the side of the bed, took one of Leris's hands in hers, and waited.

Once or twice someone had asked, after a bout, why Leris did not take her bow in her real body. How could she respond? How could she explain that her human form was hers but not her, not in the way the spear was? Since the earliest days of swordform there had been stories of people who were more weapon than person. Leris didn't feel like she was a weapon, but she'd never been able to articulate a different explanation.

“I’m fine,” she said a few minutes later, sucking in a ragged breath and propping herself up. At least they had won. It was easier to get through the crash when they won. The high of the fight, the low after coming out of swordform, and then belated elation—it was neat. Symmetrical. “We free?”

“For now,” Gerthe said. The look in her eyes was inscrutable.

“Merciful Sister,” Leris said, delighted, the pleasure of victory right on schedule. “I’m starving. There any roast pork left?”

There was, and some of the flatbread, too, colder and less fluffy than the night before but plenty filling. She sat on the steps of their hut with a wooden plate and looked out at the sea. There were four of the little houses all lined up, far enough from the arena to give the gladiators a little privacy. Each was a hexagon, two windows and a door on the front three sides, a bed up against the rear side, and precious else besides. It was a beautiful place to sleep in the sun and miserable in rain.

“Should talk,” Gerthe said, and Leris realised she was still sitting by the bed, deep in thought.

Those were dangerous words from someone who never spoke a full sentence when a single word would do. “Sure,” Leris said after a pause slightly too long to be casual. “Grab some food.”

Gerthe settled in on the steps with a plate of her own, and for a few minutes they ate in silence. Presently she put the plate down and cleared her throat. “Bout was over,” she said. “Didn’t need to go for the sweep.”

“Don’t see as you get to complain when you’re the one waving me around like a big stick. Just following your lead.”

Gerthe grunted. “Wasn’t my lead.” She paused, as if this assertion had spent all her words. “You know how I feel about me leading.”

“Hard not to know. *Only fools follow where their weapon leads*, right?” It was an old Traitian proverb. When the game of gladiators had still been in its infancy, someone had been inspired, and ever since, the person who assumed swordform had been called the *lead* and the person who wielded them the *follow*. “More’n one way to interpret that, is how I see it.”

It wasn’t the first time they’d had this discussion. No one knew whether the terminology had been meant ironically or not, and the question of which partner should truly be in control had inspired many a drunken argument. For most teams it was largely academic: they alternated between roles, and either settled into an arrangement that worked for both or went their separate ways. When one partner could only perform one role, though, it became a thornier issue. Gerthe hated leading. Leris couldn’t follow. It made them compatible,

in one way, but it was also a constant balancing act. Acting in tandem could too quickly become subservience of one to the other.

“Not the point,” Gerthe said, frowning. “Next time, don’t overdo it.”

“Find me a fairer fight and I won’t need to,” Leris said. “Not my fault those guys were shit. Only so often I can be the spear. Girl’s gotta entertain herself, right?”

“Know how I feel about that, too.”

Leris scowled. “Don’t,” she said. “Nothing wrong with enjoying swordform.”

“Difference between enjoying and hiding. Want to make sure you’re not hiding from something. That’s all.”

“You don’t know what it’s like.” It was a weak response, but Leris had no desire to examine herself too closely. It worked, for now, and it made her happy, for now, and that was enough.

“Don’t I?” Gerthe said mildly. “Ought to talk to Ulmo about that some time.”

Leris’s jaw worked. This discussion, too, they’d had before, and she knew exactly where it was headed, knew she couldn’t win. “Drop it,” she said eventually. “Plenty of time to question my choices after we’ve won another couple fights and qualified for the Leshin tournament. Okay?”

Gerthe shrugged, easily, like it was no matter to her.

\* \* \*

Dinner came by sunset. It was unspoken tradition that gladiators shared a meal together after the end of a competition, and Leris had come early to the beach to claim a space by one of the two fire-pits. Gerthe was still in their hut. That was also a sort of unspoken agreement.

The fire was coming along nicely when the first of her erstwhile opponents approached. It took Leris a moment to recognise him. He looked older and more confident than he had in the arena, unsure whether to be sword or man. She motioned him to the spot next to her.

He sat, and they spent several minutes in silence, seeing to their food. He'd brought two long wooden skewers on which chunks of meat alternated with sweet potato, and that more than anything marked him out as Traitian; even an imperial would tan up nice and brown, but no true islander would bother spending money on beef when there were cheaper alternatives. "Antion," he said, once the skewers were arranged to his liking on the fire.

"Leris." For her part, Leris had gone spearfishing and caught a marine iguana. She didn't have to catch her own food, not most of the time, but there was a certain pleasure in watching imperials' faces while she turned the lizard on its spit.

“I know.”

Her lips twitched into a smile. “Fan, are you?”

“I am now. Watched both your other bouts. You’re wasted in the rimward isles.”

Leris stretched and shrugged the compliment away, as if this was the sort of conversation she had every day. “How ‘bout you? Don’t see many Traitian fighters out this far.”

“I’m barely from the Empire,” he said. “Grew up way out on the coast. Never even been to Traiti. We figured it would be easier to make it out here than back there.”

“Oh? How’s that working out?”

“Fairly well, as it happens. I assure you, our encounter this morning was not representative.” His confidence was undermined by one of his skewers toppling into the fire. He cursed, pulling it out before the wood ignited.

The iguana was getting on. Leris took it off the fire and laid it on the stones in front of her, careful to keep it out of the sand. “Want some?” she asked as she set about carving it.

“If there’s some to spare.”

She hid her surprise. “Do I look like I could eat a whole lizard?”

“I suppose not,” Antion said, reaching out to pluck the offered piece of iguana from the tip of Leris’s knife.

She watched him chew. “Ever had iguana before?”

“No,” he said. “But I’ve eaten just about every fish you can catch between here and the mainland. It’s not so different.”

They were quiet again while Leris ate. In due course Antion withdrew his own meal from the fire, slid a chunk of beef off the tip, and offered it to her.

“You don’t have to,” Leris said. “I know that stuff’s not cheap.”

“How about this, then. Answer a question for me and I’ll share.”

She swallowed a bite of iguana. “You want to know why we never switch. Gerthe and I.”

He had the grace to look embarrassed. “You get that a lot?”

Leris made a noncommittal gesture. “Everyone wants to ask. Most people find Gerthe too intimidating to actually ask. I’ll give you half an answer, for half a skewer. Plus you can have as much of my iguana as you like.”

“Deal.”

Antion scraped half his skewer onto his plate, then offered the remainder to Leris. The meat was delicious: it had been some time since she’d had beef, and there were other flavours, too, spicy and sour and sweet. He must have brought spices over from the mainland. “Good deal,” Leris said, raising the skewer in salute.

“Glad you think so.”

It was good of him not to press her. Leris took her time with the food. “So,” she said once she’d finished licking her fingers clean. “Gerthe is from Mnibo. You know where that is?”

“Of course I do,” Antion said, and she nearly laughed at his affronted tone.

“Mniboans are a bit different to the rest of us,” she went on. “Even more different, I should say. Don’t be getting any of them Traitian notions that islanders are all the same.”

He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good.” She paused. “You ever heard of Mniboan twins?”

“Sure. Twins so close they can hear into each other’s minds, right? Always figured that was an exaggeration. But twins are important on Mnibo, I know that.”

Leris smiled slightly. It was a common misconception among those imperials who did not place stock in things they did not understand. “No exaggeration. You’re off, though. It’s not that they hear into each other’s minds. They *share* a mind. Two people in one body.”

He was looking at her as if trying to work out if she was teasing him. “Really.”

“Swordform’s been around, what, a few centuries? Go back before that and tell the first person you see that you have the

ability to turn into a sword at will. How d'you think they'd react?"

Antion thought that over. "Okay. I see your point."

"Anyway, you're right. Twins are special on Mnibo. And the first thing Mniboan twins learn is that their sense of self is the most important thing they possess. They couldn't survive, otherwise." Leris looked right at him. "Imagine you were told, over and over, to always maintain the boundary between you and your twin. Then imagine someone told you to enter swordform."

She could see the emotions playing across his face: the memory of swordform, the sheer surrender to something that was inside you but greater than you. It was a heady thing—and a terrifying one, if the something inside you encompassed another person.

"I see," he said after a few seconds. "Yes. I think I understand."

"Gerthe *can* do it," Leris said. "She has to be able to. It's in the rules somewhere. But she really, really hates it."

Antion finished the last few bites of his dinner. "And that's why you always lead."

"Well," Leris said, "that's *half* the reason." People always assumed it was Gerthe—as the enigmatic Mniboan—who was the limiting factor in their partnership. It never occurred to

them that Leris, too, had her issues; that the self-assurance required to maintain a partner's swordform eluded her. "But half the reason is all you paid for." She stood up, dusted herself off.

"Wait," Antion said. "Before you go..." His brow furrowed. "I don't know the etiquette very well. Forgive me if I offend." He cleared his throat. "Would you be interested in, maybe, finding somewhere private and OK...?"

Leris looked him up and down. It was tempting. "Sorry," she said. "We're out on the morning tide. Need the sleep."

"Of course," he said. "Perhaps we'll run into each other again. Good night, Leris."

She had to give him credit. There wasn't a trace of disappointment on his face, nor resentment in his voice. It almost made her change her mind; it was rare enough to find someone who wore rejection well, never mind someone so young. But she did need the sleep, and if she was being honest with herself, the night after a competition was never a good time for sex. "We're heading for the end-of-season tournament on Leshin," she said instead. "And a good night to you."

\* \* \*

Dawn was still a vision of the future when Gerthe shook Leris awake. "Time to go."

Leris was not a heavy sleeper. Five minutes later she was following Gerthe down the beach, bag slung over one shoulder, idly scanning the horizon for a hint of pink. “How’s the rations looking?”

“Picked up a few things last night. Last us until Leshin.”

The island they were on had a name, but there were dozens of atolls just like it among the rimward isles, and Leris was too tired to remember which was which. A settlement faced onto the lagoon, no more than a few hundred paces away across the breadth of the island, and a half dozen boats moored in the shelter of the reef. The crowd at the arena had been larger than the entire permanent population of the island, swelled by visitors from neighbouring atolls not lucky enough to attract a gladiatorial game themselves.

The water washing over their feet was still warm. It was always warm, this far east, even while further west the seasons stretched towards winter. “Straight to Leshin?” Leris tossed her bag, knotted shut and waterproofed, into the netting between the two hulls of their catamaran. “Or did you have any stops in mind?”

“Fighting season’s nearly over. No point dawdling. Not with this.” She touched the document cylinder at her belt. There was a freshly sealed and stamped sheet of paper there, certifying them as undefeated champions of the previous day’s

games. There were other ways of qualifying for the end-of-season tournament, but none as cheap. An ocean and a half away, and the bureaucracy of empire remained unimpeachable.

Their boat was about as large as a boat sailed by two people could be. Launching it spared no time for talking. Leris scampered back up the beach to untie the mooring line—they had taken one look at the wind-slanted mooring posts available on the beach and fastened it to a tree instead—while Gerthe waded further in, bracing herself against one of the hulls. A minute later, the boat was drifting out on the soft, implacable work of the tide. They'd timed it well: grounded by low tide, the catamaran was almost too heavy even for Gerthe to move.

Leris hauled herself up over the side and settled into the steerwoman's position at the stern. Amidships, Gerthe was busying herself with the sail. An easterly wind flapped around them, eager to fill cloth. Leris nudged the boat out past the reef and into open ocean.

"Big Sister have our backs," Leris muttered, raising a hand in deference to the expanse of water at their stern. She had discarded the island nomads' superstitions long ago, but of the world's two oceans, no one tempted Big Sister's ire and walked away entirely at peace.

Time passed. The sun warmed Leris's bare back. In a few hours the heat would grow miserable and she would huddle in

the simple shelter that took up half of their starboard hull. Until then, the water and the sky conspired to make her feel at peace. It wasn't difficult to find one's way in this part of the archipelago—the rimward isles were small but numerous, and there was always another blurry silhouette in the distance to navigate by. She settled into the journey, hand on the tiller making adjustments before she was even consciously aware of the change in their course.

Gerthe took her place an hour shy of noon. Leris retreated to the starboard hull, lying on her back, the blue of the sky cut off by the palm fibre of the shelter on one side and the sail on the other. The cloth was off-white, much-patched, trimmed in looping black all the way around. They had compromised, when they'd first acquired the boat. Gerthe had named it as Mniboans did, in secret; Leris had gotten the sail. Some of the patterns around the edge were crisp, where she'd paid someone to dye the cloth; others were smudged and hazy where she'd done them herself, with inks not quite up to the task. On one occasion she had resorted to embroidering in thick, black twine. All of them contained something of her: some recognisable to her people, her parents, her lovers; others spelling out her quietest thoughts in letters only she could read. In the middle was the spindly form of a spider crab, the symbol of the family she'd left behind.

She slept. Gerthe woke her hours later, the sun obscured on the horizon by the oppressive grey of rainclouds. They took shelter in the lagoon of an uninhabited atoll. The next storm, two days later, caught them on the open sea between the rimward and the inner isles. They weathered that one, too, taking the sail down and lashing every last thing they owned in place. Afterwards Leris tabulated their losses in water skins gone overboard and food ruined where waterproofing had failed.

They barely spoke throughout. This was their life, and they could perform it without a script to follow.

On the fifth day, the peaks of Mount Leshin appeared on the horizon.

“Heard a rumour,” Gerthe said. She was sitting with her back to the mast, mending her leathers.

Leris didn’t take her eyes off their destination. “Yeah?”

“Maria Agrippa is on Leshin. For the tournament.”

Leris glanced at her. Gerthe hadn’t looked up from her sewing.

“Really? Why?”

Gerthe shrugged.

They were quiet for several minutes. Then Leris said, “Got a few theories.”

“You and every other gladiator in the archipelago.”

Maria Agrippa was a legend. Twenty years ago she and her partner had been the greatest fighters in the Traitian Empire; ten years ago, the elite ranks of gladiators had been full of those she'd personally trained. Now she was the Aedile—the overseer of the games—in Traiti itself, and as far as any gladiator was concerned, the single most important person in the world.

Leris wasn't naïve. The gladiatorial circuit in the archipelago was a shadow of the sport as it was practiced in the Empire. She'd heard the stories, from imperials down on their luck: amphitheatres in every city, crowds thrice the size of the largest on Leshin, the week-long festivities of the Empress's Honour. What gladiator wouldn't yearn to see such things? Whatever Agrippa was doing in the archipelago, it meant one thing: opportunity.

“Why tell me this now?”

“Didn't want you to think I was keeping it from you,” Gerthe said.

“You know how I feel about the Empire.”

“I know.”

“And I know how you feel. But this is different, isn't it? If— if she's here recruiting, then it's different. We could make the journey to the Empire, if there was a guarantee of something bigger there.”

“Knew you'd say that, too.”

Against her better judgement, Leris's heart was beating faster. She wanted to see those amphitheatres, hear those crowds. She wanted to be whomever she wanted to be, without the fear some family member was watching her and cataloguing her. She'd kept the desire carefully tucked away. Nothing good came of wallowing. It was a month's sail to the mainland, another week's to the Empire's heartlands—a journey they could make, but not if they wished to have money to live off in the Empire, or to put in supplies for the return trip. The two of them made do. There was never too much and rarely too little. Sailing for the mainland would mean risking that balance, and Leris knew all too well how difficult it could be to right.

“We can win,” Leris said quickly. “If that's what it takes. I know we can.”

“Maybe.” Gerthe finally looked up. “Other reasons to avoid the Empire.”

“I don't care. I'd take the risk.” Leris took a deep breath. “Please. If the opportunity comes up. Think about it?”

“Not just up to me.”

“I know. All I'm saying is, consider it. Talk it over.”

Gerthe shrugged one shoulder. “Do that anyway.”

The conversation was over then. Leris turned her attention back to the island growing ever larger in front of them and tried to ignore the excitement taking up residence inside her.

\* \* \*

Leshin Harbour curved around the catamaran like a parent welcoming a child. The city began at the island's tips, a smattering of houses in amongst the treeline, growing denser and denser along the beach until living wood was replaced entirely by dead, the buildings so close together their roofs made a second street in the sky. Lights twinkled higher up, where the city spilled over onto the slopes of Mount Leshin, buildings clinging to ever sheerer ground.

Afternoon was already passing into evening by the time Leris stepped from gently rocking boat to solid wood pier. They'd moored next to the usual bevy of nomad ships, and her gaze automatically darted from sail to sail, cataloguing which families were present. That was the problem with being born to nomads. Wherever she went in the archipelago, family might be there.

Then she saw the ship docked a few hundred paces up the beach.

"Well," she said, "guess we know where the rumour came from."

It was a trireme. The Traitian sea horse emblazoned on its mainsail made no mystery of its origin, and the emblem painted in vivid colours on the stern was familiar to every gladiator worth her salt: the crossed sword and trident of Maria Agrippa.

Leshin Harbour wasn't the largest city in the archipelago. The capital of Mnibo, Bonomo, was larger, and the Seven Cities half again as large as that. But it had been the original home of the Inland Seas Trading Company, and of the dozen other imperial trading concerns that had followed, and in a few short decades had become the richest. The imperials had carved out their own little piece of the island; the docks had grown until they could accommodate a dozen or more of the sea-nomad tribes; yet even Leshin Harbour was unaccustomed to the sight of a Traitian warship in its waters.

Gerthe's pack landed on the pier by Leris's feet, followed shortly by Gerthe herself. "We going?"

Leris blinked. She'd been staring at the ship, imagining it underway, canvas full and oars shipped, Little Brother's waters parting beneath it like fog as it made its way from Trait to Leshin. "We're going," she said, and tore herself away.

The torchlighters were halfway through their rounds. It put a strange cast on the city: one side of the street lit by cheery, flickering light, the other with shadows caught on every

corner. Leris put it out of her mind. She was off balance. The thought of leaving the archipelago filled her with a heady blend of anxious excitement. The Empire, far from family, might be exactly what she needed. Or it might not. Knowing it was useless to wonder didn't make it any easier to stop.

Gerthe led the way. It was a straight run from the dock to the heart of the city, but she veered off after only a few minutes, taking a rickety wooden staircase up to a rooftop, then a series of bridges leading away from the main road and into the denser mass of the Transient Quarter. The city was broadly divided in three: the original, permanent residents lived further up the slopes of Mount Leshin, in the old town; the administrators and traders in the central districts; and that left the area closest to the water, for sea nomads, independent merchants, gladiators—everyone whose bond with the island wasn't as strong as the call of the ocean, who needed a place to stay only while they concluded their business ashore. The rooms of the Transient Quarter led brief lives as family homes, trading hubs, storage depots.

The rooftops of Leshin Harbour were always a little hazardous to navigate. One never knew what hastily erected bridges had rotted through and collapsed into the alleyways below, to be replaced by narrow wooden planks spanning slightly less convenient gaps. The main paths never changed,

though, and in short order Gerthe was knocking on the door of the Mountain Singing, their Leshin home.

It wasn't an inn, not quite. There were two sprawling floors, yes, occupying the upper storeys of an old warehouse, two dozen little bedrooms, and a common area below. And there was a kitchen, and a bar, and a man who oversaw it all, but he was not an innkeeper, just as the woman serving drinks wasn't a bartender. Better to say it was a rooming house, a place where transients could find a bed and a meal, and pay for it with their own skill in the kitchen or with mop and dusting cloth. If it was an inn, it was one run by its customers.

“Leris a Leshin, as I live and breathe! A glorious homecoming to you!” The voice of the Mountain's owner, Jotan, cut through the murmur of an early-evening crowd. A few heads turned; a few eyes lingered. The Mountain didn't cater exclusively to gladiators. Even so, her name was well-known enough on the island to elicit curiosity outside the usual gladiatorial circles.

“If it's so glorious,” she shot back, “you oughta give it a try some time. Or have you finally sunk your claws too deep into this place to ever leave?”

Across the room, Jotan beamed at her and waved them over. There were two cups already waiting, dark rum mixed with coconut cream. Leris downed hers in one swig, ignoring

Gerthe's subtle frown, and began to parry her way through the usual polite conversation. Some days, she enjoyed this sort of thing: the catalogue of her past weeks, the tales of victories won. But she still felt off-kilter, and Jotan's comment had needled her more than it was fair to let on. Leris a Leshin, she was called, and the name had meaning, even if no one seemed to believe it of her any more. She had family in the old town, just as every nomad had family among the shorebound, and there was always a part of her that wanted to be with them instead. That wanted, one more time, the warmth of a true homecoming.

"Been a long week," Gerthe said into a lull. "Usual room?"

Jotan didn't take offence at being cut off. "Just freed up this morning. I assume you're staying a while?"

"Through the tournament. After that..." Gerthe shrugged.

He nodded knowingly. It was bad luck to make plans ahead of a major competition. One never knew the size of the winner's purse waiting on the other side.

"Come down once you're rested," he said. "Darius came in last night and he's making his fish curry. Trust me. You want to be here for it."

Gerthe nodded amiably, and a minute later they were making their way up the stairs, to the little room at the end of a corridor that was unfailingly theirs.

“Had drinks waiting,” Gerthe said once they’d closed the door behind them.

“Must have someone at the docks. They run back, let him know who’s coming, he makes sure there’s something waiting for ‘em.”

“Room’s always empty.”

“He has a soft spot for me.” Leris stretched and threw herself down on one of the beds. “Or you, I dunno. He knows we like this room, is the point. Why’s it on your mind now?”

“No reason.”

“In that case, I’m napping. Wake me up when it smells like it’ll be worth my while.”

Leris never had trouble snatching sleep where she could find it. The day had been long, and this bed was as close to home as she had on dry land. But when Gerthe shook her awake, she could not remember having slept at all.

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Darius was half imperial, half islander, and so was his curry. Leris was finding it difficult to put on a cheerful face, but she was grateful for the food nonetheless, and if anyone found her too brusque that night, she hoped they chalked it up to tiredness. And tiredness was part of it: she slept straight through the night, woke easily and clearly. Even so, she felt unsettled, as if someone had moved one of her possessions

while she slept and upon waking she could not quite remember its proper place. Perhaps it would be better after all, she thought idly, not to go the Empire, not if the mere possibility had her nerves on edge like this.

Gerthe never slept much and was gone by the time Leris woke up. That wasn't unusual. Neither of them minded a little menial housework, and Leris was a perfectly adequate cook, but with a tournament to prepare for, they preferred to pay for their room by restocking the bar. Most likely, Gerthe had made an early start for the market.

The common room was in the quiet between early and late risers. Leris helped herself to the remnants of breakfast—half a baked fish, a vine leaf stuffed with rice—and didn't bother looking up when, halfway through her meal, the front door creaked open.

Someone pulled out the chair across from her. "Would you look at my luck! Found you first place I looked."

Leris looked up. Antion looked back. His skin bore the mark of another week under the sun, nearly as dark as hers was now, and there was a large document cylinder under one of his arms. "You were looking for me?"

He waved the question away. "Not specifically. But there's news, and I'd hoped to get to tell you myself."

"Oh?"

Still smiling, he unscrewed the document cylinder. “I got back two days ago. Nowhere near qualified for the tournament, of course, but you know how it is, I have a cousin whose friend works for Agrippa, and they roped me into running this little errand for them.” He drew a rolled-up stack of papers out of the cylinder, unpeeled the outer sheet, and shoved the rest back in. “Here. Read for yourself.”

Leris smoothed the paper out on the table. Half was taken up by a print of the Arch of Triumph in Traitî. The rest bore a few lines of text, the Traitian lettering thick and awkwardly formal but just about readable. It was a poster, an advertisement really, and once she’d finished and handed it back to Antion, it pained her to continue feigning disinterest. “Figured there was a reason Agrippa was here,” she said.

Antion’s expression made Leris feel like she’d wronged a small dog. “I must admit, I was expecting more of a reaction.”

“Sorry.” Leris leaned back, tipping her chair onto its hind legs. There was something disappointing about seeing him here, where he was just another imperial at his overseer’s disposal. She liked him better as a kindred soul, flung far out beyond the centre of the archipelago. “I was planning on winning regardless.”

This little piece of bravado wasn’t true, not usually. *Winning*, in the sense of being the last team standing, was

never really the point. Winning *enough* was what they aimed for.

“Still,” he said, “it’s a rare islander given the chance to compete in the Empire. I can only remember a half dozen off the top of my head, and believe me, I’ve been paying attention to the games since before I learnt swordform.” His voice dropped to a whisper, conspiratorial. “I don’t believe one has *ever* fought for the Empress’s Honour.”

He plainly expected that to be the crown argument, and Leris let her expression grow more arrogant. “About time then,” she drawled.

“That’s the spirit! If you’ll excuse me, I have a dozen more places to be before noon. Do me a favour, would you, put that up somewhere the other gladiators will see it?”

And so she was left, sitting alone at the table, rereading those few scant lines of text. *To the winners of the tournament, passage to the Empire, the chance to compete in the capital. Everything arranged by the power of the Aedile.*

Leris was a realist. It wasn’t the promise of glory that called to her. This tournament, here, on Leshin? She and Gerthe could win it, on a good day. But the path from here to Trait, to the Empress’s Honour, was far steeper than they could climb. Success there would be measured only in preserved dignity. Why risk losing to the best fighters in Trait,

in front of thousands of people, in front of *this* Empress in particular?

The rest of it, though—the rest of it spoke to her. To leave the archipelago behind without a care for what lay on the other side. To fight before crowds whose only preconceptions of her were based on the place of her birth, whose anonymous faces would never be sketched with the disapproval of her family. To see the Empire as a guest of Maria Agrippa herself, each city on the gladiatorial tour welcoming her as something other than an itinerant fighter one mis-step from poverty.

“Damn it,” she said under her breath. Her hands were balled into fists. Scraps of paper lay on the table where she’d unconsciously torn the poster into bits. There was nothing for it: the anxiety, the excitement, it all boiled over and she laughed wildly, because the emotions demanded some outward conduit. “Damn it all to Sister’s darkest abyss.”

\* \* \*

Leris made the announcement after dinner, in lieu of putting the poster up. The reaction was expected: the instant buzz of excitement from the gladiators; polite interest from the rest of the room.

Afterwards she caught Gerthe’s eye. The two of them cut a path through the mildly inebriated crowd, fending off shouted questions en route to the stairs. The noise receded with each

step, and Leris could feel Gerthe growing a little more relaxed beside her.

Neither of them spoke until they were in their room again, watching the sun set over the harbour.

“You want this,” Gerthe said.

Leris was pacing, awkwardly, the size of the room barely giving her five full steps. “Course I want this.”

“Why?”

“Why *not*?” Leris said, more loudly than she’d intended. She took a breath. “If nothing else, it would mean living off the Empire for months. You heard the deal. Everything’s on them.” It was the obvious thing to say: a prize any gladiator would jump at. But it was also not the only reason, and Gerthe would know perfectly well that Leris was holding out. “Two or three fights a week, and the rest of the time—food, drink, a place to sleep, as much as we want. We’d be like celebrities.”

“Or exhibits.”

“Know what? If the good people of the Empire want to come gawk at us exotic islanders, that’s fine by me. I can put up with a hell of a lot when someone else is paying my way.”

When Gerthe spoke again, her words came with great care. “You haven’t been to the Empire. I have.” The gravity in her eyes snagged Leris mid-stride. “The Empire is a part of life here. It has its uses. It causes its problems. But it can never

truly rule in the islands. It knows that, and we know that, and that is why we can coexist.

“Within its borders it is different. Oppressive. Being there, you never forget that you are not *from* there.” Her words flowed like a mudslide, slow to start but unstoppable. “You leave the Empire a different person than you were when you arrived.”

Leris waited a few seconds, but nothing else was forthcoming. “Real pretty,” she said. “Great speech. But c’mon, you’re being dramatic. We could handle ourselves a few months.” Gerthe turned away, and Leris sighed. “Fine. It’s much of a muchness unless we win, anyway. Just—talk to Ulmo, all right? Do that for me. We can figure the rest out later. If we have to.”

There were no more words from Gerthe that evening. Perhaps it meant she had taken Leris’s suggestion and was talking to her brother, or perhaps not. Leris could never tell. Either way, Gerthe had said enough. Slipping under her thin blanket, Leris couldn’t banish the thought: *you leave the Empire a different person*. Gerthe had meant it to scare her off, she knew. No doubt the sentiment was sincere, but Gerthe had made an error. She knew Leris well enough to know those words could never be a deterrent. More so than anything

Antion had said, more so than anything written on the poster, it was those words that kindled a fire in Leris's heart.

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The tournament began the next day, which didn't mean Leris and Gerthe had anything to do. This was the largest gladiatorial event in the archipelago. It took place over three days, and the first day was dedicated to the walk-ins, the teams no one had ever heard of, who'd scraped the money together for the entrance fee and now fought to earn their place in the real event.

Leris made her way to the amphitheatre at a leisurely pace. Wind funnelled down the narrow streets of the Transient Quarter, but it was warm enough yet that the goosebumps spilling across her skin made a welcome change from the sun. Gerthe had disappeared after breakfast. Leris never asked—the two of them were both private people, in their own ways—but she suspected Gerthe's errands were fuelled by a desire for solitude. It was easy to find space for oneself out on the open water; less so in Leshin Harbour.

The amphitheatre rose over the city's central square in airy defiance of gravity. It might have loomed, but its triple row of arches let the sun through to dance and dapple the stones of the square. The preliminary bouts had already begun—there was the familiar buzz from inside the arena, highs and lows and

breaths caught in hundreds of throats. Sit and listen, and one could map out the shape of every fight.

A queue wound up and down the steps in front of the amphitheatre. Leris felt the familiar surge of pride as she ignored it, heading instead for the competitor's entrance on the opposite side. A few heads craned to follow her trajectory, wondering whether they should recognise her, but absent her partner Leris was just another young woman in a sarong. She had learnt to live with that. Gerthe was the recognisable one. It was Leris's own fault for hardly ever appearing out of swordform.

The guard at the competitor's entrance, at least, knew who she was and let her pass without comment. The temperature dropped as she descended the steps into the amphitheatre's bowels. It was like entering a different world, one populated only by her kin. Leris spent most of the fighting season on the periphery, but here was the reason she did what she did: the feeling of walking into an arena ready room, the nervous energy of a dozen gladiators waiting for their turn in the sun. It was intoxicating. Tomorrow she would sit where they sat, feel what they felt, but today she made her way past the medical station, the changing alcoves, the equipment racks, on light feet.

“Registration,” Leris said once she reached the podium at the centre of the room. She didn’t recognise the clerk in charge—a Traitian woman, dressed in heavier imperial styles that made sense in the gloom of the ready room but would be torture in the humidity outside. Perhaps she’d accompanied Agrippa.

The clerk held out one hand. Leris fished Gerthe’s document cylinder out of her sarong, removed the confirmation of their victory, and handed it over. There was a candle on the podium, and the clerk held the precious page so close to the flame while she read, it was all Leris could do not to snatch it back. Finally, the woman put the confirmation down and made a note on the scroll in front of her.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Last bout.” She was holding something out: a wax cylinder, stamped around the edge with the day and time slot.

Leris took the cylinder, nodded her thanks, and retraced her steps. She took the other set of stairs by the competitor’s entrance, leading up to the section of stands reserved for gladiators who wished to watch their competition at work. Compared to the rest of the amphitheatre, it was sparsely populated—teams in the preliminary bouts rarely made it very far; they were not of much interest to the serious fighters. She enjoyed it, though. She’d been in her share of preliminaries.

There was something about watching those younger versions of herself out on the sands that made Leris appreciate where she was now. Had there been other gladiators watching from above when *she* fought, marvelling how far they'd come since their days in her place? The image didn't bother her as much as she might have expected. Five years down the line she would be another Leris, as far removed from her current self as the young gladiators below, and that was a calming thought.

When Gerthe found her two hours later, Leris made room at the end of the row for her to sit. They watched in silence. Four teams began each preliminary bout, and two remained in the latest bout: a pair of islanders, both axes, and a mixed imperial-islander team, a spear and a sword. As she watched, one of the axes came down on the haft of the spear, throwing the islander out of swordform. It was sound strategy, if you could manage it, forcing an opponent back into their human form—breaking the physical contact between a team was as good as disarming them—and the axes parlayed the advantage into an easy win.

“Bad form,” Leris said while the winners took their fill of applause. The losers had already disappeared down one of the tunnels that led to the ready room. “Should've felt the blow coming, hardened her haft. Probably could've stayed in swordform.”

“Take your word for it.”

“We got the last slot,” Leris said.

Gerthe grunted. There were advantages and disadvantages to fighting last. The bouts on the second day had the same four-team format as the preliminaries, but it wasn't enough simply to win. Only the eight best teams advanced to the third and final day. Fighting last meant knowing exactly how high the bar had been set.

On the other hand, it meant hours spent in the ready room.

“Sorry,” Leris said. “Know you don't like the waiting.”

“We fight when we fight.”

Another bout was beginning. The first of the four teams took their place on the sand. Leris leaned her head on Gerthe's massive shoulder and let the noise in the arena hold her nerves at bay for one more afternoon.

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The ready room felt colder the next day, when it was her turn to sit and wait. They'd arrived at the amphitheatre just as the sun rose high enough to peek out above it; now, hours later, that brief kiss of warmth felt much farther away.

Gerthe had found a corner in which to sit and wait. Leris wished she were capable of such calm. It always hit her early on the day of a big fight: the knot in her stomach, like a hook

trying to pull her away from the arena. In the midst of the fight, when she was the spear, was the only time she ever felt certainty. The rest of it—the waiting, the come-down afterwards—was ripe for self-doubt. Sometimes it was hard to remember the one when the other was upon her. Sometimes she worried it was unsustainable. Perfect certainty or perfect doubt did not seem like a solid foundation on which to build herself.

The sound of the crowd surged, as if a bee heard faintly through a window had suddenly entered the room. The stone separating the ready room from the arena was too thick to admit any but the crowd's wildest exuberances. It meant another bout had ended, and yes, here came the last defeated team and a minute later the victors, laughing and replaying their triumph in voices too loud for echoic stone.

There was a large slab of slate propped up against one wall, where the results of each bout were recorded for the benefit of the remaining gladiators. Leris's mood soured further when the clerk chalked in three vertical lines next to the names of the latest winners. The number marked a complete victory: a bout in which the winners had personally defeated each of the other three teams. It was possible to win a bout by playing defensively, waiting until only one other team

remained, then striking—but such a victory was not valued as highly.

“Another clean sweep,” Leris said, stalking over to Gerthe. “Everyone wants to win. No one content to play it safe this year.” With two bouts remaining, there were seven threes on the board. Most years it was rare to see more than two or three. “Seems to be working out for them, as I see it.”

She wasn’t sure if Gerthe was even awake until Gerthe spoke. “We don’t see how many tried and failed.”

Leris sat down next to Gerthe. “I’ll be straight. I reckon we go for it.”

“Score two,” Gerthe said slowly, “we’re set through next season.”

“Score one and we’re shit out of luck.”

“Find other work. Get by well enough. Better than losing the bout.”

“Look, I get it. It’s a risk. But if we go for three and make it... Quarter-final prize money gets us through a lot more than just the next season. Worth it, even if we don’t make it any further than that.”

Gerthe looked at her. They both knew Leris wouldn’t take the risk just for a shot at more money. It was one of the ways they were compatible: when it came to money, neither of them

wanted more when they had enough. “Worth it for you,” she said eventually.

Leris sighed. “Yeah. I know. Worth it for me. But you don’t want to go to the Empire.”

Gerthe didn’t reply. Above them, the bee-loud crowd yelled its appreciation for the penultimate contestants making their way out onto the sand. Leris wanted to press the issue, but there was no point. Gerthe knew it was not money that drove her. She would make her own mind up about the Empire, and Leris could only hope she did so in time for it to matter.

“Better get ready, then,” Leris said, and turned away.

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Viewed from the shade of their tunnel, the arena was little more than a blaze of white.

Leris squinted. She could just about make out the other three teams, less disadvantaged by not having to look directly into the sun. Didn’t matter. She ran through her pre-fight ritual: shake off the nerves. Keep limber. Not that she’d spend much time using her limbs in the fight, but the ready room had a way of making your body cold and stiff, even after stretching.

The winners of the last bout had only bested two of their opponents. That meant the situation was straightforward: win in a clean sweep and advance, or beat two and be at the mercy of the judges whose job it was to break ties. There were at least

a dozen other teams with a score of two and only one place left in the quarter-finals. As far as Leris was concerned, the second option was as bad as outright defeat.

Gerthe still hadn't said anything. The master of the arena had begun to announce the teams. Leris swallowed. The easiest way to guarantee defeat was to fight at cross purposes. "Ready?" she said at last.

There was a moment's silence. Then, "Ready."

Their names rang out across the amphitheatre, delivered in a voice that made the stones reverberate around them, and something in Leris shifted from nerves to pure confidence.

"Let's win this."

They stepped through the curtain of light and noise together. It had been months since their last fight on Leshin, and Leris breathed in the sense of being known and respected; of standing in front of a crowd that cheered them, specifically, and not merely a strange pair of gladiators they'd never seen before.

Then her attention was on their opponents, working to make up for the analysis the sun had denied them in the tunnel. Two teams she recognised from the preliminaries: to their right, a pair of islanders, young, inexperienced if their performance the previous day was any guide; across from them, the team of axes. To their left were the Ekide siblings,

veteran imperials who'd made their home in the archipelago for over a decade.

“Go right,” Gerthe said.

“We'll have a clear shot,” Leris agreed. “Axes'll go for the Ekides.”

Gerthe glanced at her questioningly.

“Just trust me, okay?” Leris said.

Somewhere in the stands, the master of the arena struck her gong, and there was no more time for words. Leris's hand found Gerthe's and a moment later she was a spear again, vibrating with repressed energy that would have been laughter if only a weapon could laugh. The worries of her human life couldn't touch her, not like this, and she felt the same allure she always did, the joy of simply *being*.

There was no sound, no sight, and yet she could feel Gerthe beginning to run, could feel the sun on her haft disappear as they entered the shadows of the amphitheatre. Ahead were the two young islanders, one only now shifting into swordform—and he *was* a sword, Leris could tell, unusual for an islander—barely in time to block Gerthe's first overhand blow.

In a normal fight, a sword might have sheared straight through the spear, but Leris felt the blow coming, felt it in the eddies of displacement between her and the sword, and it was a

simple thing to redirect her strength to that one point, make it strong as metal. The force of the blow went straight through the sword and up the follow's arm, causing her to stumble backwards a few steps.

Leris almost felt sorry for her. The woman couldn't raise her lead in time to fully block Gerthe's next blow, horizontal this time, and Leris felt rough leather parting beneath her blade as the glancing blow skipped off the woman's shoulder.

To her credit, the islander remained on her feet. She was off balance, though, and Gerthe fought as she always did against inexperienced opponents: no time for respite, blow after blow delivered with great strength but little finesse. Leris's blade did little more than loosen armour or leave shallow scratches. Her haft did most of the work.

Three more desperate steps backwards, and the islander woman finally lost her footing. Her lead shifted back into human form, but before they could switch roles, Gerthe brought Leris down, her blade pressing gently into the woman's throat.

This was the dangerous moment. There was no codified point of victory: your opponents simply had to yield. In a more dangerous matchup, Gerthe would press the advantage, batter them down, allow no last moment of heroism. But here, against

two young people who'd most likely never fought on Leshin before...

It was enough. The woman dropped her gaze and crossed her wrists in the ritual gesture of surrender. In an instant Gerthe straightened, bringing Leris up with her to stand at attention like a guard. Now that they were no longer in the fight, their opponents were already fading from Leris's awareness, replaced by the other two teams, locked in much more evenly matched combat somewhere on the other side of the arena.

And yet Gerthe remained in place.

Instantly Leris was human again. "What are you doing?"

Gerthe shrugged.

"Abyss take you, Gerthe, that was as easy as we could have bloody well hoped for. We can take a two-on-one."

"Ekides haven't won yet," Gerthe said. "Means the axes are good. Not sure your confidence is justified."

Leris hoped the other fight was as diverting as it sounded. The thought of a whole arena watching them argue was strangely mortifying. "S'why we take 'em by *surprise*," she said through gritted teeth.

"And do what?"

Leris let go of Gerthe's hand, the better to step in front of her and glare. The difference in their heights made it less

effective than she might have hoped. “I’m a fucking spear,” she got out. “*Use me like one.*”

Gerthe tilted her head down and met Leris’s gaze. There was a thoughtful look in her eyes entirely at odds with their surroundings. “What does it mean to you?”

“What?”

“The Empire,” Gerthe said. “What does going there mean to you?”

Leris stared at her. “Merciful Sister, *now* you want to have this conversation? Not any of the other times you shut me down? You trying to tell me you and Ulmo had time for a nice chat between now and the ready room?”

“Yes,” Gerthe said. “Now.”

Leris closed her eyes. It was so hard to switch track, to go from the sheer instinct of the fight to being asked to put words to her desires. “I want to be me,” she said at last. “Really me. I want to be somewhere where—where there’s no one around to tell me that doing one thing makes me someone else. I don’t want to look over my shoulder every time I mend the sail, in case someone I know is watching. Sometimes I feel—none of it would matter so much, if I could just be somewhere where no one knew where I came from.”

Gerthe was quiet for several long seconds. Leris kept her eyes closed, lest they fill with disappointment. Then Gerthe was

speaking: “They’ve disengaged. About thirty paces apart. You’ll be on your own around twenty seconds. Chege is leading. Nifu will try to switch, but she’s the weaker lead. Keep the pressure on and you’ll have her.” She frowned. “Try not to lose before I get there.”

Leris’s heart beat faster. “Okay,” she said. “And—thank you.”

Gerthe grunted and offered Leris her hand. “Thank me if we win.”

Leris twisted into swordform again, feeling Gerthe’s hand close around her haft, feeling herself being hoisted up—

The strategy was simple. Gerthe threw her.

An unfortunate truth of swordform was that Leris could never see herself as the spear. The few times they’d done this before, though—Leris was confident she could imagine it perfectly, from the slight spin of her haft to the sun shining off her blade. There was a world around the edges of her awareness, calling to her, trying to bring her back to her human body, but she ignored it. It was easy to ignore it—easy to let the joy of the flight take her somewhere else, somewhere beyond the reach of the body she inhabited the rest of the time.

The throw was almost perfect, and Leris made it perfect by pushing off the wind here, letting gravity take her a little faster there. It felt like sailing.

It was all but impossible to kill someone while in swordform. The body rebelled, in a way that it did not when using an inert weapon, a tool, something to shift the blame to. A killing blow would invariably sour at the last moment, glance off armour at an improbable angle or pass through the thin space between arm and torso. Gerthe knew this. She knew to aim for a minor injury, and so Leris flew straight over the shoulder of one of the axes, arced downwards, and sliced through the side of Nifu Ekide's thigh.

Leris was human again before she even hit the sand, twisting around into a crouch. The crowd silenced and then roared. Maintaining swordform without a follow to focus you, keep you grounded in yourself, was almost unheard of. Leris let herself enjoy the moment for the length of two heartbeats. Then she leapt forwards. Nifu had half-turned towards her, unsure whether to face the threat ahead or behind, and it was easy to hook one foot around her wounded leg and bring her to her knees. Blood dripped from skin to sand, red-on-black to red-on-white. Distantly Leris was aware of the axes closing the distance, one pace at a time, but time felt thicker in the moment, irrelevant to her actions.

Nifu on her knees was short enough for Leris to wrap one arm around her neck. She struggled against Leris, the shield that was her brother's swordform useless in such close

quarters. A moment later Chege Ekide was human again, but Leris jerked his sister's body between them, staving him off. She could all but feel Nifu trying to enter swordform, but Nifu's focus was broken by the arm around her neck. Chege, a more skilled lead, might have done it—but that was why Gerthe had chosen to strike when she had.

“Yield,” Leris said, not to Nifu but to her brother, because after ten years in the arena all one's weaknesses were public knowledge. She tried to conceal the strain in her voice, the tremble in her arm.

Chege glanced sideways. The axes were nearly on them.

“Yield!” Leris said, louder, but the word came out more as a plea. Chege had to know he and his sister had lost. The only choice now was who to give the victory to.

This wasn't the first time they'd fought. Chege nodded once, respectfully, and crossed his wrists. Leris jumped back, gasping for breath, thanking the spirits of luck that they'd come up against someone who liked her more than a pair of upstarts.

The Ekides were picking themselves up off the sand, getting in the way of the axes just enough that Leris, small and quick, had time to scramble to a safer distance. The follow was a short man, but the lead made up for his reach: long-handled, shaped almost like a woodcutter's axe but with two blades

rather than one. They approached slowly, blade whistling through the air in lazy showmanship.

The show took Leris off guard. The follow struck, suddenly, faux swipe turning real in the time between seconds, and this time she jumped back too late, the very edge of one blade catching her sarong and drawing a stinging line across her wrist. The speed wouldn't have been possible with a normal axe, but then a normal axe couldn't think for itself.

“Should've worn armour, little girl.”

Leris scoffed. She'd watched these two fight the previous day, noticed the arrogant way they held themselves, the way they always went for the biggest threat first, like trying to impress on everyone that they were afraid of no one. It was why they'd engaged the Ekides first.

Shame their threat assessment was off.

“Must be new around here,” she called, dancing away. This time she made sure to keep out of reach. “Or you'd know I don't do armour.”

The man brushed confusion aside quickly. “I know who you are. And I know you've got an inflated opinion of yourself, for someone who can't even follow.”

“Don't need to,” she said. “Gerthe is a perfectly good weapon all on her own.”

This time confusion made him hesitate. He started to turn, but Leris darted forward, trying to get inside his reach, and he brought his lead up just in time—

Gerthe's fists came down on the base of his neck. He crumpled to his knees, axe falling to the ground. Gerthe stepped on the other man's chest as he came out of swordform and brought her weight down on him. The follow was doubled-over, dry-heaving.

"Next time fight," Gerthe said. "Don't talk." Her expression was a blend of sorrow and world-weariness. "Amateurs."

\* \* \*

Twenty-four hours later, with the blood that had decided the tournament's final bout still staining the sand, Leris stood before the Imperial Box and listened to the master of the arena proclaiming someone else's name.

*Imperial Box* was just a name, of course—the Empress herself had made the trip out to Leshin only once, early in her reign. This time, her absence was for the best. It was bad enough to lose in front of Maria Agrippa. Leris's breath caught in her throat as the strain of being human again mingled with the bitterness of disappointment. She closed her eyes, took deep breaths. Gerthe, stoic as ever, moved one hand to her shoulder, casual, discreet.

Later Gerthe would tell her that they had fought as well as they possibly could have. That they had breezed through the first two matches of the day without relinquishing a single point, fighting like someone out of the stories, possessed by the wind and the sea and thrown against their adversaries. She would say—and eventually Leris would believe her—that there was no shame in losing on the fifth point of a best-of-five match.

Eventually, Leris would get over it. Presently, she was forced to stand and listen to someone else being given the prize she'd been so sure would be hers. She'd built an image of the Empire, of what going there might mean for her. Now she'd never know if she was right.

Agrippa rose to take the place of the master of the arena. She was a woman like an ancient oak, her beauty changed but unmarred by time. “Darius a Terevan,” she said, her voice ringing like a note perfectly struck, quiet but seemingly immune to distance. “Tane a Terevan. I congratulate you. I know what it is to win. I hope you will do me the honour of joining me, that we may speak of victory and pleasant things.”

Then she shifted slightly, and suddenly her attention was on Leris. “Leris a Leshin. Gerthe a Mnibo. I know what it is to lose, too. Defeat makes for unpalatable conversation, but I would ask you to indulge me.”

She turned to leave. The master of the arena stepped in again, hasty platitudes on her lips, but it was as if Agrippa had spoken the last line of a well-known play: the crowd rose as one and applauded the actors lined up on the sand, the glorious victors and noble losers, and the sound of their appreciation followed Leris all the way down the tunnel.

There was no one in the ready room but the four of them. Leris changed in silence, replacing her sarong, stained red-on-red by a shallow cut on her shoulder, with a darker one, silver patterns on black.

“It was well fought.” Darius’s voice was quiet behind her. Leris did not turn. “I... I thought you had us. You were the best fighters in the arena today. Luck as much as anything.”

Leris took another moment for her own emotions. Then she put on a smile and turned to face him. “Spare me the false modesty,” she said, but jovially, matching grace in victory with grace in defeat. It wasn’t all fake; she *liked* Darius, liked his fish curry and his shy islander husband, hovering just behind him. It was a little easier, losing to someone she liked. She clapped him on the shoulder. “You know the rules. Victor buys the drinks. Bit of modesty ain’t getting you out of that one.”

She felt him relax a little, as if he’d been worried she would react badly, but whatever else he was about to say was curtailed by the sound of a throat being cleared behind them.

Agrippa's clerk stood by the door leading up to the surface. "If you are ready, the Aedile would speak with you."

Agrippa herself had phrased it as a request. The clerk—surely one of the only people on the island who'd use Agrippa's official title—made it sound like an order. Whichever, it made no difference. No gladiator would turn down the chance to hear what Agrippa wished to say to them, even with no idea what that might be.

It was enough, almost, to make up for losing. The clerk led the four of them through streets only now blazing with dusk, and something gloomy in Leris lifted. If it was not quite winning—well, even the consolation prize was worth having, from time to time. Hundreds of lines of verse had been written about Maria Agrippa. She'd risen further than nearly anyone in the Empire; born into a servant-class family, raised in the villa of a minor noble, she'd befriended the daughter of the house, a girl wild and free. Together they'd discovered swordform. Together they'd plotted their escape. It was the sort of story that ended badly nine times out of ten. Agrippa and her partner had been the lucky tenth.

Leris had assumed they were being led to one of the more distinguished guesthouses in the city, but soon their path turned towards the docks. A moment of confusion—was Agrippa staying in one of the dockside establishments? Then

there came a gap between buildings and she glimpsed the banner of the Traitian Empire, the seahorse too dark to make out but identifiable nonetheless by the sheer size of the cloth.

She'd never been on a trireme before. She'd never been on anything larger than a sea nomad family-ship. Her heart beat a rhythm it took her several moments to identify as fear, shifting almost immediately to annoyance: it had been nearly a century since the imperials had come seeking war. The trireme was a glorified meeting place, nothing more.

Empty oar-ports gazed out at them as they waited for a gangplank to be lowered. All the pictures Leris had ever seen showed triremes with their triple bank of oars deployed. Without them, the ship looked smaller, like a crab curled up on itself.

Gerthe went first, gangplank creaking beneath her weight, and Leris felt herself flush. There was nothing to be afraid of here. The trireme felt different beneath her feet when she boarded: no longer a symbol of imperial power but simply another ship, even if one larger than most. Her mind was filled with mundane questions: was the crew ashore, or sleeping belowdecks? How many sailors did a ship this size carry? It seemed odd she'd not seen any of them around the city.

“This way,” the clerk said. Leris started. She hadn’t even noticed Darius and Tane come aboard. “Aedile Agrippa will receive you in the main cabin.”

The main cabin was the only part of the ship to rise above the deck. It occupied nearly the whole rear third of the ship, and the four of them were shown into a small antechamber, lit by soft yellow lanterns and furnished comfortably.

“The Aedile will see the losers first,” the clerk said, indicating Leris and Gerthe, as if they might have forgotten the outcome of the match. “It will take some time to go over the arrangements with our esteemed champions, and she does not wish for her other guests to wait unnecessarily.” Leris winced: the way she said it, it was clear the clerk thought losers ought to wait on winners, no matter how long it took.

“Of course,” Darius said, taking a seat on a low divan. He smiled at Gerthe. “Don’t hurry on our account.”

And then there was no time to think any more because the door at the other end of the room opened and Leris found herself ushered into the presence of Maria Agrippa.

Her first impression was that the cabin was larger than it looked from outside, even with several bulky pieces of furniture occupying much of the space: a carved desk, two chests by either wall, three chairs that matched each other only in the quality of their artistry. There was a small shrine in one corner.

Leris's knowledge of the labyrinthine Traitian pantheon wasn't nearly good enough to determine which deity it venerated.

She forced herself to look at the woman sitting behind the desk. Maria Agrippa was in her early fifties, black hair gone silver around the edges, but she watched them like a much younger woman; like a gladiator sizing up her opponents. Leris thought it likely she'd never learnt to look at anyone different.

They stood, mute, for several seconds. There was a small smile on Agrippa's face as she gestured for them to sit.

Agrippa broke the silence first. "Congratulations."

To Leris's surprise, Gerthe got there first. "Didn't win," she said, her voice filling the room like a roll of thunder.

Agrippa raised one shoulder in an elegant shrug. That was one detail the stories had right. If one didn't know them, it was said, it was all too easy to mistake Agrippa for the noble's daughter and her partner for the former house servant. "Winning is one thing. Excellence another."

"Know which one I'd have preferred," Leris said through gritted teeth.

Agrippa laughed, so utterly sincere it was hard to hold it against her. "Do you know why you lost?"

So that's how it was going to be. "We weren't good enough," Leris said, trying to make her voice flat. "We didn't

want it enough,” she added, because that was what one said after losing, even if it was a barefaced lie.

“Wrong,” Agrippa said. “On both counts. You were more than good enough. You simply wanted it too much.”

Leris blinked. Gerthe filled in the gap: “Explain.”

Agrippa didn’t seem perturbed by the curtness. Perhaps she’d dealt with Mniboans before. “It was the first lesson we learnt,” she said. “When we still lost more than we won. Livia Aurelia wanted to win more than anything. But that drive, it paralyses you. She could not imagine defeat, and that blinded her to all the possible paths that led to it.” Agrippa smiled fondly. “You remind me of her, Leris, as she was back then. But a true champion knows that defeat is always a possibility. The secret is not to care, because a true champion also knows that victory arrives eventually.”

Leris only half heard the words, because in that moment her heart understood something her mind had known almost as long as she could remember. Livia Aurelia was the name Agrippa’s partner had fought under, but it was strange to hear it now, two names combining to be more intimate than either alone. To the rest of the world, the woman who’d been Livia Aurelia was known by either five names or just one: Livia Amer Aurelia Maria Iuliana, or just Livia.

It took Leris a few moments to understand that she'd just been compared to the Empress of Traiti.

"That's..." she began, because the sentiment required a response, but her mind had gone quite blank.

Agrippa waved the lack of words away. "This is not a lesson I can teach you here, in this cabin. It will take time. But you will learn it in the end, I think." She stood. Leris followed reflexively. "I wish we had time to speak further—I freely confess I have never seen anything like your strategy, and were it up to me we would measure our conversation in jugs of wine." She spread her hands apologetically. "But duty calls." She'd come round from behind her desk. Gerthe got up to make way for her, head nearly scraping the ceiling. "Perhaps I will see you on the Traitian circuit this season."

Leris tried to hide her scowl. "We lost." She'd been reminded of that fact more times tonight than she was comfortable with.

"Of course," Agrippa said, her voice full of polite confusion. "You missed out on one opportunity. But the purse for the runners-up is not insubstantial. There is more than enough there to take you to the Empire, should you wish it, and I can provide you with letters of introduction that will open the door to any amphitheatre you'd care to fight in."

Leris froze. She had been so focused on winning, so desperate to see the Empire, that she had begun to conflate the one with the other. *Not* winning, yet still being able to go—that had not occurred to her. “I don’t—I mean, we haven’t...”

“Thank you, Aedile.” Gerthe’s voice cut through the knot in Leris’s tongue. “It will be a pleasure to see you in the Empire.”

\* \* \*

## II: FARHOME

Two weeks out from Leshin, the weather turned.

“Thought all the big storms were out east.” Gerthe was watching the horizon with the quiet tension of an animal who knew danger was near.

The crossing to the mainland was typically quite safe. Leris didn’t think it would be helpful to offer up that fact. “The *really* big storms are out east,” she said instead. “But Little Brother has his share of the little ones.”

“A little big storm,” Gerthe said. Under other circumstances Leris would have thought her amused.

“Right. I say we keep an eye on it.”

Gerthe frowned. “Any shelter hereabouts?”

“It’s fine. We’ve ridden out bigger.”

Gerthe said, “Leris.”

It was relatively rare for Mniboans to travel. Gerthe knew her way around a boat, but she left the navigation to Leris,

who'd spent the first sixteen years of her life sailing the span of the archipelago. Which was to say, if Leris told her there was nowhere close enough for them to wait out the storm, Gerthe would believe her.

She hesitated. "There's a place a few hours north-west. We could make it."

Gerthe wasn't stupid. There wasn't much between the archipelago and the mainland, still less of it occupied. "Farhome," she said.

"Yes. If we had to."

When Gerthe spoke again, the words came slowly. "If you asked to put in at Mnibo... I would say no. I cannot demand that you do otherwise."

Leris supplied what Gerthe was tactfully omitting: "But it would be stupid to risk the storm when there's shelter nearby. We can aim for the far end of the beach, keep away from town. If we're lucky, no one will even notice I'm there."

"Will it be a problem? If someone does?"

"Not... exactly. They didn't kick me out. I left. It would be unpleasant, though." She forced a measure of optimism into her voice. "Family's unlikely to be here this time of year. There's nothing to worry about."

\* \* \*

The outer edges of the storm had reached Farhome by the time they slid into the arms of the lagoon. Leris drove the catamaran onto the beach, far enough from the cluster of sails on the other shore that the sheeting rain made it impossible to make out the family emblems adorning them.

Her hopes of not being seen were dashed almost immediately by a hunting party emerging from the trees some fifty paces down the beach. All women, of course—fishing and hunting were women’s work. The men would be in town, in the little cluster of buildings that was the island nomads’ only permanent settlement, taking down sails and securing shutters against the wind. She raised her hand in casual acknowledgement and turned away, heart racing, but they showed no sign of recognition.

There was no time for anxiety. The sail needed to be taken down. They lashed it to the catamaran like a makeshift tent, to keep the worst of the rain at bay. It made for fitful sleep.

Come morning, the storm had passed Farhome by. The skies to the west, towards the Empire, were clear. Leris assessed the damage: the catamaran had survived unscathed, but the sail had developed a hole where a small tear must have been widened by the wind. She reached for needle and twine.

“Could top up the water skins before we leave,” Gerthe said.

There was an undercurrent to her words, like she was asking for permission. “Sure,” Leris said. “There’s a stream just outside town. And... hang on.” Clear skies and the prospect of imminent departure were making her magnanimous. She rummaged through their supplies, judging what could be spared, and settled on a bundle of greenwood and a package of dried fish. “Take this, too. The shelter price. They know we’re here, so we ought to behave like proper guests.”

\* \* \*

Leris was almost done mending the sail when a shadow fell across the hull.

“I saw your mother not two months ago.”

The voice was not Gerthe’s. Leris’s hand jerked, almost burying the needle in the flesh of her palm. Her heart beat hard.

There were two of them watching her work. One she recognised immediately: Moati, who she’d always liked and who’d have been her uncle the way the rest of the archipelago reckoned it, but he wasn’t family and therefore deserved only an acknowledgement of shared blood. The other was a woman, tall and strongly built, spear tucked casually into the crook of her elbow, a light sheen of rain giving her bare arms the look of polished stone. She wore her sarong in the traditional manner, wrapped around the waist only. It took Leris longer to

remember her name: Kahana, who spoke for the Three Currents family. If they were the family currently in residence at Farhome, then she was the greatest authority on the island.

“Was she well?” It was as noncommittal a response as Leris could manage. Kahana was also some manner of relative, but in her case the lack of a closer family bond had not been regretted.

“Healthy as a whale calf.” Kahana was grinning broadly. “She’s going to be thrilled.”

Something in her tone was off. Leris had feared a measure of aggression from her people, but this was different. Kahana was acting as if she’d won a bout Leris hadn’t even known she was fighting.

“About what?” she asked.

“You. Here.”

“My partner and I needed shelter from the storm,” Leris said carefully. “I respect the traditions, so we paid the price. That’s all.” She knew better than to call them *our* traditions.

Kahana lowered herself into a squat, her balance belying her bulk. “Stay,” she said.

Leris felt suddenly hemmed in. It took an effort of will to remember that she was an adult, in control of her own life. Kahan wouldn’t force her to do anything. Probably.

“You’ve got the wrong impression. We’re headed for the Empire. Me and Gerthe.”

“The Mniboan? Heard some strange tales of late. Imperial triremes in the archipelago. The Agrippa woman as far east as Mnibo. Mnibo and the Empire, avoid the one, avoid the other, and definitely avoid them both at once.”

“As soon as Gerthe gets back,” Leris said, as calmly as she could, “we are leaving.”

Confusion crossed Kahana’s face. She gestured at the sail. “I don’t understand. I see you working. It suits you.”

Leris was on her feet, hands forming and unforming fists. “Yes, I’m working, and the only reason I can sit here and do it is because I know it’s my choice. And now you’re here, telling me that this’—she brandished the sail like a weapon—”means that I belong. Well, I don’t. Not if your first reaction to seeing me do men’s work is that it’s all back to normal.”

“I’m sorry.” Kahana stood, slowly, as if unwilling to cede either the advantage of height or the appearance of conciliation. “I only thought, your mother—”

“You don’t have any idea what happened between my mother and me,” Leris snapped. “I didn’t have to pay the shelter price, but I did, out of respect, and the least I expected in return was respect for my own fucking choices. You understand?” Kahana opened her mouth. Leris barrelled right

past. “But instead you try and pin me down again, the moment you see me. As if I need to be *miserable* just to justify my own fucking existence. You know what? This is why I’ve never come back before. I had enough misery the last time round.”

Kahana did not respond.

Into her silence Maoti said, “What if it were women’s work? What if we had found you fishing, and asked you to stay regardless?”

Leris glanced at Kahana. It was a taboo that Moati was breaking, in a lowkey kind of way; exactly the sort of behaviour Kahana, as head of family, should object to. But she was quiet, balancing on her heels, watching Leris with nothing more than curiosity.

Several seconds passed before Leris could reply. That was what she’d wanted, when she’d been sixteen, and it had driven her to leave. It was surreal to have it offered to her now. But even if it was meant in good faith—even if her own family could be convinced to take her back on those terms—she found it was no longer what she wanted. Certainly she still gravitated more towards what the nomads called women’s work, as she had back then, and it was not unheard of for nomad women to become gladiators. She could end her estrangement and still live a version of her current life. But then who would take care of their boat? The nomads called that men’s work. Whichever

way they looked at her, they were too fond of their traditions to accommodate the spectrum of who she wanted to be.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. She tied off the final knot, carefully, and let the sail slip from her fingers. “That just isn’t who I am.”

Here, finally, was Gerthe, returning with water skins slung over her shoulder, and the sight of her broke whatever remaining hold Kahana had over Leris. Gerthe was witness to the life Leris had built for herself. Proof that there was space, away from Farhome, for the person Leris had become.

Gerthe handed the skins over without sparing Kahana so much as a glance. She braced herself against the hull, ready to launch them into the waves, and looked to Leris for confirmation. Leris loved her for it. No doubt, no hesitation—only trust, that the bond between them was stronger than whatever Kahana had come to say.

Leris nodded. Gerthe pushed. Their catamaran slid forward, slowly at first, sand scraping against the hulls, and then was lifted by the sea. A moment later it rocked with the weight of Gerthe joining her aboard.

Kahana watched them leave. Her gaze was like a hook tugging at the back of Leris’s neck, beseeching her to turn back one last time. It had been easy to leave her people once, full of the conviction of youth; it was harder to do it a second time, no

longer quite so certain, no longer quite so driven, but sure of her decision all the same.

\* \* \*

### **III: EMONA**

Ten days later Leris caught her first sight of the continent.

There shouldn't have been anything special about it—from up close, there was little to differentiate a large island from the mainland—and yet there was. All her life she'd bobbed about on the world's oceans, and here was a landmass fit to stop her in her tracks.

Little Brother was separated from the Inland Sea by the Straits of Ilili, and they passed so close to the northern edge of the straits they could see the tiny figures of soldiers moving along the walls of the fortress there. While they watched, the fortress's beacon was lit, shining across a dozen miles of sea to its twin on the southern shore.

“Sticking to the plan?” Gerthe asked quietly as they left the gateway to the Empire behind. She was navigating, the Empire being one of the few places she knew better than Leris, though truth be told there was little more to it than picking a coast to follow.

The plan was Traiti, still days away at the centre of the Inland Sea's web. The plan had been decided before Farhome,

though, and in the ten days since then, she'd been turning her conversation with Kahana over in her mind.

The desire for something, *somewhere* else was still there, but she felt increasingly as if something was not quite right. All her adult life she'd been distancing herself from her childhood, but a single interaction with her people had been enough to make her wonder what she really wanted from them. It would have been easier if she'd hated it. Regardless, it seemed unwise to throw herself at Traitl without the full knowledge of what it was she sought there.

“Is there somewhere closer?”

Gerthe glanced at her, expression even, but Leris knew her well enough to read the surprise. “Something wrong?”

“Not wrong. I just thought, you know, maybe it's better to ease in.” She tried a smile. “Find somewhere a little smaller.”

“That woman, on Farhome. Was she... ?”

The question hung to be completed however Leris wished. Gerthe hadn't brought the matter up before now. It was so perfectly characteristic of her: perceptive but giving Leris her privacy, letting her answer on her own terms.

“No. I mean... I expected her to disapprove, but it wasn't that, really. She wanted me to stay, but... it was like she couldn't fathom why I wouldn't want to. She even tried to

accommodate me. It was... I don't know. I don't want to talk about it right now. Maybe another time."

Gerthe held her gaze a few seconds more. "There is Emona," she said eventually. "On the northern coast. The capital of the eastern Empire. Still large. Still worth our time. But not Traiti."

"How far?"

"A day. Less."

"Sounds perfect." Leris leaned back against the mast. "I'll be glad to leave the sea behind for a few days, won't you?"

Gerthe was beginning to look worried. "Everything all right?"

"It's fine. Really." Leris squinted into the sun. Even knowing it was beyond the horizon, she imagined she could see the southern shore. "Everything just feels a little off. Just got to get my bearings, that's all, and I figure that'll be easier somewhere a tad smaller."

Gerthe nodded. "Finally. Some wisdom."

\* \* \*

Emona had been the greatest city in the world, once; or so the stories said. Before the states of the Inland Sea had been cobbled together into a single empire, Emona had stood at the mouth of the river Vecce and dictated the way of things. Then Traiti had risen across the Inland Sea, younger and hungrier,

and for decades control of the world had hung in the balance. Euphemistically they were called the Traitian Civil Wars, but Emona had not been part of the Empire at their outset, and the question was not truly settled for years after their end.

Even now, Leris was in the process of discovering, the sea dragon of Emona outnumbered the Traitian seahorse. The boat approaching them was small but broad, rowed by two men with a third, neatly uniformed, at the bow. It was the sea dragon that flew from the stern and the sea dragon that was stamped into the leather of the soldiers' chest armour.

Once the boat was close enough, the man at the bow said something. Leris blinked at him. He sighed and repeated himself in the islander lingua franca: "Toll for entry into the Inner Harbour."

"What?"

"Space in the river docks is limited. You can pay the toll or tie up sea-side." He sounded bored.

In the archipelago it was rare to have to pay for mooring, never mind mere entry into a harbour—but there were at least a dozen of the boats patrolling the mouth of the Vecce, and Leris could see three other ships being accosted as they tried to enter the river. "How much?" she asked.

The man named a price. Then he named several other prices, each with their own specific conditions attached.

Leris didn't know if they qualified for a cultural trade exemption. She was about to give up and make for the Outer Harbour instead when Gerthe said, "Gladiators' Dock."

The toll collector frowned at her. "You're gladiators?" Gerthe stared at him as if this were the stupidest question she'd ever been asked. He cleared his throat. "You'll need documentation from at least a third-rank official—"

"Will this do?" Leris had been rummaging in the document cylinder and now produced one of the letters of invitation Agrippa had supplied.

She kept one hand on the letter as he read. "Technically," he said, sounding a touch nervous, "this letter is not specifically for entry into the Emonan docks—"

Gerthe cut him off with a bark of laughter. "Better take another look at the seal."

The man swallowed. Then he named another price. It was lower than the others.

"That was different," Leris said after they'd paid and were on their way again.

"Told you."

"Told me what?"

"Empire's rules. Expect everything you do to be wrong in some way."

"Worked out pretty well, I thought."

“Maybe. Imagine we hadn’t had the letter. Got lucky, too. Even Agrippa’s seal might not have got past a stricter bureaucrat.”

“And in the end we only got a discount. I see your point.”

“Watch. There’ll be another fee for the berth.”

There was, but Leris didn’t mind too much. The Gladiators’ Dock was tucked into the left bank of the Vecce, just shy of the point where the river narrowed and met the city proper, and Leris was more than happy to soak the city in while Gerthe haggled with the harbourmaster. There was a bridge a few hundred yards upstream, larger than any Leris had ever seen, its stone arches skipping across the breadth of the river, a steady stream of traffic crossing from one bank to the other. She felt mesmerised by the sight, like a child preoccupied with a line of ants along a branch.

“Done here,” Gerthe said, startling her out of her reverie. “Take your things.”

Leris had expected to head into the city and find an inn, but instead Gerthe led her along the river, into the shadow of the bridge. There they sat in an office for nearly an hour, waiting to be officially recognised as gladiators. Afterwards there was a stop at the constabulary, where Agrippa’s documents came to their rescue once again. They left the

building with a pair of iron pins, crudely made, in the shape of stylised seahorses.

“Why do we even need to register?” Leris said, failing to hide the sourness of hours’ waiting. “There must be hundreds of foreigners in this city. Thousands.”

“Two kinds of people protected by Traitian law,” Gerthe said. “Full citizens and servant citizens. We play by the rules, they agree to treat us as the former.”

“And what? Otherwise we’re servants?”

“No. Neither. And fair game. Step outside the docks without a pin, the law doesn’t care who does what to us.”

Leris adjusted her pin, hanging awkwardly where the two ends of her sarong crossed her chest. The archipelago did not codify classes of citizens. Restricting a person’s rights because of the circumstances of their birth seemed the height of absurdity, and yet it had never occurred to her that someone could be treated as belonging to no class, as simply... *not*. What was worse—to live a second-class life but be secure, at least, in your place in society? Or to be free but untethered, falling through the cracks? It was an unsettling question. What was worse—to make an arbitrary choice and be part of family again? Or to find her own way, and trust it would lead her somewhere worth going? That question, Leris thought she knew the answer to.

The registry office had provided the name of an inn that catered to gladiators. Leris, distracted by her own thoughts, paid attention to their surroundings only in snatches: the bright red of the awnings in a market they passed, the sheen of a white marble fountain, the detail on the entablature of a temple.

The inn was a square two-storey building with a courtyard in the middle, a wooden staircase in one corner leading up to the mezzanine. There was another fountain in the middle of the courtyard, but in grey stone, and the atmosphere was comfortably unrefined. Less comforting was the way the owner glanced at their seahorse pins before putting on a smile. “Gladiators?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Leris said, relieved that, for the first time that day, someone hadn’t assumed they spoke Traitian.

“Good, good.” If the appearance of two islanders in her courtyard fazed the woman, she didn’t let it affect her hospitality. “My name is Iulia and I am the proprietor here. I have several rooms available on the first floor. Will you be staying long?”

“Week to start with,” Gerthe said. “Hoping to fight.”

“Naturally. You have the necessary paperwork... ? Some of the other residents can fill you in better than me, but you might want to try the Arena Subterranea. There’s an entrance to the

Undercity in the basement, next to the communal rooms, and it's not far from there.”

Leris was contemplating the concept of a city with more than one amphitheatre, and the foreign words didn't quite register. “How frequent are the games?”

Iulia smiled. There was something genuine about it, like a parent delighted to be asked about their child. “At least twice a week at most arenas. There are matches somewhere in the city every day. Only Traitu and Urb Gladi have more, and the amphitheatres in Emona are more beautiful than anything you'd find there.” Her expression changed, and it was back to business. “Now, if you'll just give me your names for the tenancy forms...”

\* \* \*

They had lost almost the whole day to bureaucracy, and Leris was determined to make up the lack. Leaving Gerthe to enjoy the comforts of their new lodgings, she set out in search of food and returned, an hour later, with a flatbread stuffed with ground beef, for which she had paid far too much, and the uncomfortable awareness that everyone she'd passed on the street had looked at her and known her to be other than them.

“Find anything?” Gerthe was lying flat on her back, hands tucked behind her head.

Leris sat down hard on the other bed. “Market three streets away. Food there if you’re hungry.”

There must have been some tension in her voice that made Gerthe say, “All right?”

It was stupid. Leris hadn’t expected a single day in the Empire to wash away her uncertainties, but she felt disappointed all the same. She’d expected *something*. Some sign that this had been the right choice. She didn’t want to voice this thought aloud, especially to Gerthe, who had not wanted to come in the first place, but equally she did not want to dwell on it alone.

That left only one choice. “Gerthe,” she said, slowly and carefully, “can I talk to Ulmo?”

Gerthe went very still, head half-cocked as if listening for a distant signal. Then she was gone.

“Hello, Leris,” Ulmo said.

Leris hesitated. She’d only spoken to Ulmo a dozen or so times over the years, and it still caught her by surprise the way someone could look the same and yet be so obviously different. “Hi.”

“Is there something I can help you with?” His words came more easily than Gerthe’s, and not for the first time Leris wondered why it was he and not his twin who spent most of his time in the back of his own mind.

“Um.” She alit on the first question that came to mind: “What’s the Undercity?”

Ulmo’s lip quirked. “Emona is ancient,” he said. “The street level has risen over the centuries, and the lowest levels are entirely built over. There’s a whole second city under the streets.”

If Leshin Harbour built above the streets, Leris supposed, it made sense that the Empire should go the other way. “And we’re going to fight down there.”

“You’re going to fight down there,” he corrected.

“Right.”

“Forgive me, Leris, if I suspect you wanted to talk about something other than Traitian urban planning.”

Leris blew out her cheeks. “Yeah. I guess... I guess I should start by thanking you.”

Ulmo stood and stretched. He seemed lighter than Gerthe, somehow, more sure of himself. It was pure illusion, of course: Gerthe had the balance of a veteran gladiator. “Thank me for what?” he said at length.

“You took my side, right? That’s why Gerthe agreed to come here.”

“We do things unanimously or not at all, my sister and I. But I won’t deny I argued your case for you.”

“Well. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And how are you finding the Empire?”

It was never entirely clear to Leris how much Ulmo heard. There’d been a few false starts, but in time she’d accepted that anything she said to Gerthe, she might be saying to Gerthe’s twin as well. Even so, she couldn’t tell if he’d guessed what was bothering her, or if he was simply making conversation. “Different. Not what I expected.”

“It rarely is.” Ulmo pursed his lips, so unlike Gerthe that Leris nearly laughed. “Tell me. You said you wanted to come here because you thought it would be easier to be yourself. Is it?”

Leris flicked a burr off her sarong. “I don’t know. I feel like I’ve barely had time to be anyone. But... Back home everyone wanted me to be one specific thing. Here, it feels like they all want me to be one *general* thing. You know? I’m an islander. Just like every other islander. But maybe I don’t wanna be just, you know, just one thing or the other.” She pulled at the seahorse pin at her neck. “Would be nice if they hadn’t felt the need to record my existence in such detail, I guess.”

Ulmo was watching her, one hand stroking the side of his face—not in thought, but like someone unused to having a physical body.

“When I first met you,” he said slowly, “I made an assumption about you. I thought that you were told at birth to

be one way and wished to be the other. I thought, perhaps, that your people were not as accepting of such things as mine, or even as the rest of the archipelago. But Gerthe's had a few conversations over the years that made me think I'd reached the wrong conclusions." He hesitated, but he was not like Gerthe. He would not end a conversation instead of asking a question directly. "May I ask why it is you left your people?"

"I suppose it's about time we had this conversation. Is Gerthe listening?"

"I don't know. I doubt it." He flashed a small smile. "She has more respect for privacy than I do."

"Well, if she isn't, fill her in later, would you? I don't wanna have to repeat myself."

"Of course."

"Right." Leris stared into space. "Sorry in advance if it's less dramatic than you expect. It's hard to really get across to an outsider." Ulmo said nothing. She sighed. "I guess I should start at the beginning. Do you know how the world began?"

Ulmo shook his head. He did know, of course, but what he knew was what Mniboans knew, and that was not the same as what the nomads knew.

"Before there was time," Leris began, "before there were oceans, the continent and the islands sat alone in the world. And the people could see the other islands, but they couldn't

get to them, and every day they were battered by storms from the east, and every day the islands got a little smaller.

“One day, the leader of the largest tribe on the largest island gave birth to twins. They grew unnaturally quickly, and within a month they had reached the cusp of adulthood. And their mother said to them, “You must be the answer we are looking for, or else why would we have been blessed with you?” And the twins, who liked their mother, conferred and agreed that it was so.

“The sister, who had been born first, said, “I will shield you from the worst of the storms,” and she took up her spear and became the ocean to the east.

“The brother, who had been born second, said, “I will unite you with your families on the other islands,” and he took up his axe and became the ocean to the west.

“Ever since, the island nomads have honoured the sacrifices of Big Sister and Little Brother by moving from island to island.” Leris stopped. Ulmo was still looking at her. “My uncles tell it better,” she mumbled.

“The story we tell on Mnibo is quite different. I like yours better.”

“I wish I could say that. But my people decided that there were two important messages to be found in it. First, that the roles of men and women are clearly defined. Women protect

family. They hunt, and fight, and sail in stormy weather. Men unite family. They build, they mend, they provide homes. And second, that everyone deserved to choose their own calling. When you turn thirteen, you have to choose whether to be man or woman.”

Ulmo thought this over. “But that doesn’t make sense. How could there have been a brother and a sister in the first place, if it was their choice that made them man and woman?”

“Wanna guess how the others reacted when I pointed that out?”

He didn’t want to guess. “And you chose to be a woman.”

Leris laughed grimly. “No. I chose to be a man.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That second rule, you see, it’s a bit flexible. There’d been an accident a few months before my thirteenth birthday. Five young men died. Family needed more. So it was made clear to me that it was my choice, but everyone would be very happy if I made the *right* choice.” Leris couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice. “I was thirteen. How was I supposed to choose myself over family?”

“It didn’t work out, I take it.”

Leris closed her eyes. “No. It didn’t. I tried. I really did. For the first year or two I thought... I don’t know what I thought. That I’d get used to it. But it’s hard to explain how it felt. The

segregation was so arbitrary. Every day I'd be told about another little thing I couldn't do anymore, because only women did that. I didn't mind the work I had to do, not for its own sake. I still do a lot of it. The way it was framed at home, though, the way everyone talked about it..." She sighed. "Just take my word for it. I couldn't bear it."

Ulmo nodded, with his whole body, like swaying on the spot. "It is different on Mnibo, of course," he said, gesturing down at himself, "because it is not unusual for a brother and sister to inhabit the same body. We have to be a little more flexible about such things. But we are taught, very early, the danger of being forced to be someone you are not. Perhaps I cannot understand, but you have my sympathies."

Leris ducked her head, trying to force herself through the embarrassment of talking about herself. The room was too warm. She got up, opened the door out onto the mezzanine. The sun had set, and the evening air was pleasantly cool. "The worst thing is," she said, "and I only realised this being in Farhome after so long, is that I *could* have been happy. If it had all just been less—rigid. If everyone had cared less about that blasted story. I would have happily mended their nets and patched their sails, if only they hadn't caused a fuss any time I so much as mentioned wanting to go spearfishing."

“Dogma is the harshest truth,” Ulmo said, and behind his steady smile Leris could see a reflection of herself.

“One day,” she went on, the sound of the fountain below bringing back memories of waves, “I was out on the water with my mother. I was fifteen. I hardly got to spend any time with her anymore, but it was her birthday and no one said anything. We sailed a bit farther out than we should have.” She laughed. “There were sharks. She’d forgotten to bring her spear. Long story short, that was the day I discovered swordform. And the spear and the axe, they’re symbols for us, you know? Female and male. Maybe she’d suspected that I’d chosen wrong, but that was when she knew. When she saw there was no axe in me.” Leris took a deep breath and wiped away the beginnings of tears. “That was when *I* knew.”

That was the story she’d told herself, *of* herself, for years. Everything would have been fine, if only she’d made the right choice. It was a good story.

Ulmo had joined her by the door. His touch, firm and gentle all at once, was one thing he shared with his sister. “And that’s why swordform is so important to you,” he said.

“Yeah. And that’s why I never could follow. The spear means too much to me. Whenever I tried, I felt like I was, I don’t, leaving the spear behind, because I had to concentrate on my partner’s swordform instead, and inevitably I panicked.

I had to stop, go back, make sure it was still there.” Leris cleared the sob from her throat. “It sounds stupid when I put it like that. I *know*, rationally, that I won’t just stop being the spear.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” Ulmo said quietly.

“Gerthe doesn’t understand. She thinks I like swordform better because I’m hiding from something, but it’s just the opposite. I’m looking for something. For a reminder. To my own *family*, I’m a man because I said so, once, over a decade ago. Swordform... *spear*form is the only way I can really show my people who I am. Myself included. I need that reminder. Sometimes more often than other times.”

Ulmo stepped past her and leaned over the railing. “Must it always be about your people?”

“What?” Leris didn’t move from her spot by the doorframe.

“On Farhome, you said’—and he threw her an apologetic grin over his shoulder, as if embarrassed to admit to his eavesdropping—”that you didn’t mind men’s work, if it wasn’t imposed on you. And, well, now we’re here. Far away from the archipelago, just like you wanted. Why not pick and choose? Take the peace and leave the dogma behind.”

It was a frightening thought. Living among the nomads had been like swimming into a strong current: let up for one

moment, and you were liable to be swept back, all your hard work undone. Faced with a weaker current, that instinct was still there, to swim for all she was worth and never look back.

“Just a thought.” Ulmo smiled reassuringly. “I meant nothing by it.” Outside, tiny specks of light danced around the trees in the courtyard. “Thank you for telling me,” he added.

“Thank you for making me realise I wanted to talk about it.”

They watched the fireflies. When even those had become familiar, Leris closed the door on a city no longer entirely foreign and went to bed.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Leris and Gerthe ventured out into the Undercity to find the arena. Leris had been expecting something like a cave, dark and damp, but in reality the streets beneath the streets were well-lit and ventilated at even intervals. Still, she found it difficult to ignore the fact that they were underground, even if the people they passed went about their business no differently to their counterparts on the surface.

The Arena Subterranea was something else entirely. It was the oldest amphitheatre in Emona, as the man in charge was all too eager to tell them, dating to a time when all amphitheatres had been dug into the ground instead of raised above it. At

some point in the past, as the rest of the city rose around it, it had simply gained a roof. Dust swirled in the four shafts of light from above, meeting the flicker of braziers below and giving the whole arena a sense of enigmatic openness.

He was all too eager to accept their credentials, too. Leris couldn't quite tell if it was Agrippa's seal on the document making their case or if the amphitheatre could use a draw as exotic as a pair of islanders—in the archipelago, the prestige of an arena was more or less measured in age; in Emona, clearly, other factors were in play.

She put it out of her mind. They had their first matches scheduled—in three days' time—and an invitation to the gladiators' box for the evening's bouts. It was what she'd wanted, and whether the venue was as prestigious as it could be didn't weigh heavily.

That left an afternoon to keep anxiety at bay. It helped that Emona already felt friendlier than it had the previous day: having a place to return for the night, and a place to fight later in the week, made a difference. The city had made room for them.

They left the arena by a different route, following directions half-forgotten after the first few turns, until a welcoming beam of natural light led them back up onto the surface and deposited them, quite by coincidence, in a plaza

larger than Leris could make sense of. Here was an expanse of cobblestone large enough to swallow the amphitheatre on Leshin five times over. The fountain at its centre, four sea dragons artfully entwined around a woman wielding a trident, would have been monumental on any island in the archipelago. Here, it barely put forth a presence. And around them, everywhere, people: people coming and going at one of the three temples that fronted onto the square, people queueing at the arena opposite, people perusing the market stalls that occupied one corner.

“Heart of the Mountain preserve us,” Gerthe muttered.

Leris came back to herself, blinking the sunlight out of her eyes. “Everything all right?” It was odd hearing the Mniboan expression—Gerthe avoided references to her home as much as possible.

“Fine,” Gerthe said, eyes tracking the progress of random passers-by. “But might leave you to it. Too many people.”

“And here I thought you were the outgoing twin.”

“See Ulmo handle a crowd,” Gerthe said, “then tell me who the outgoing one is.”

“Take your word for it.”

Gerthe squinted into the sun. “Meet you back at the arena. Be careful. Enjoy yourself.”

“I will.” Leris watched her disappear back down into the tunnels. Then she set off in the direction of the largest temple, determined to do just that.

There was some sort of procession taking place. Acolytes entered the temple on one side carrying offerings and left empty-handed from the other. Each group wore different robes and masks: as Leris stepped up to watch, a dozen green-robed men and women walked past, carrying cuttings from a tree she didn't recognise. Behind them were a handful in dark red, masks decorated with finely-carved leaves, each weighed down with a mortar and pestle.

It took Leris three tries to find someone who understood her.

“This is the temple of Nesor of the Thousand Faces,” that third bystander said. She was middle-aged, dark-skinned, a battered short sword at her hip marking her as a guard of some kind. “They are the deity of change and second chances.”

“Second chances,” Leris said slowly. Was that why she'd come to Emona? Was it as simple as that—find the temple that catered to your needs, and all was fixed? Unlikely.

The guard nodded. “Today, Nesor's acolytes give thanks for a profession found. Next week, at their festival, thousands of people will come to ask for guidance. It's a rare person who

couldn't use a little change in their lives, so the priests say." She looked Leris up and down. "What do you do for a living?"

"Gladiator."

"Is that so? You might try the festival yourself. Always draws a lot of gladiators, hoping for a different swordform. Where do you fight?"

"Subterranea," Leris said, frowning. That had to be an exaggeration—swordforms didn't change. Before she could voice the question, though, the woman went on.

"Will you stay for Nesor's Choice?"

"What?"

"Every year, hundreds apply and a dozen are chosen, one for each of the senior guilds, to begin new lives. That's what I'm for. Every so often someone reacts poorly to not being chosen." She patted the hilt of her sword. "I get 'em sorted out and back where they belong."

"You're talking about servant citizens," Leris said slowly.

"Of course." The woman's puzzlement gave way to clarity. "Oh. In Traitian, there are separate grammatical forms for the types of citizen. I forgot you had to specify, in your language."

The lingua franca was not Leris's first language. Her heartbeat was making itself known. "But—what if they don't want their new lives?"

“Why wouldn’t they? Only the unhappy apply, you understand, the lowest of the low. Any of the guilds would be preferable to the life of an unhappy labourer.” The guard smiled. “My brother-in-law was chosen. He’s a stonemason, now, and once a month he gives his work freely to maintain the temple. It’s how he met my brother, actually.” She paused, as if recollecting that Leris was a stranger. “Regardless, it’s quite a moving ceremony. Your timing couldn’t have been more perfect.”

Leris swallowed. “Fighting tonight,” she lied, forcing her face into an amicable expression. “Gotta get ready soon. But thanks.”

She didn’t stop to wonder *why* the exchange had rattled her so thoroughly but simply made her escape, turning a corner at random, then another, and another, even knowing that there was no earthly reason the guard would follow. She came to a stop, slightly out of breath, in another plaza, much smaller and in the shape of a triangle. Here, too, there was a temple, taking up one whole side, but it was shabbier, its columns weathered and its reliefs less intricate. The images were still easy to distinguish: the same four travellers on the same narrow road, repeated on each panel while the background changed behind them. The Traitian pantheon was vast, and Leris could only reliably identify the iconography of a handful of deities, but this

was one of them. In that moment, a temple to Avuria, mistress of travellers and strangers, was the only place in Emona that could have made her feel at home. There were dozens of shrines to Avuria scattered throughout the archipelago, wherever Traitians had made their mark, and a handful of temples, too. Avuria raised no walls; she passed no judgements.

The inside was agreeably dim, lit by a scant handful of braziers. Their light reflected off coins in a flat pool of water in the middle of the entry hall—offerings made in return for Avuria’s blessing. Without entirely knowing why—she’d never held by Traitian religion before, and saw little chance of doing so in the future—Leris reached into her coin purse and, not even checking its value, flicked the first coin she found into the sacrificial pool.

The soft splash made no echo.

“Thanks and Avuria’s blessing, traveller.”

Leris’s flinched. There was an acolyte sitting at the back of the room, half-hidden by shadow.

“Apologies if I startled you,” the acolyte—it was too dark for Leris to make out any facial features, and the voice was coolly androgynous—said. “Do you seek aid?”

She had meant to leave, but something about the acolyte’s voice calmed her, like a soothing balm calmed inflammation.

“Is there—is there somewhere quiet I could sit?” she asked.  
“Just for a while?”

The acolyte led her to a little courtyard, tucked between the temple itself and a row of smaller, cloistered buildings. A low wall separated the cloister from the centre of the courtyard and Leris sat down gratefully, back to one of the columns. “Thank you,” she said and then, because her heartbeat still hadn’t settled and it galled her not to know why, “Who is Nesar?”

The acolyte tilted their head. It was a reassuringly human gesture. “Seen the festival preparations, have you?”

“I asked someone there, but...”

“But you seek another perspective.” The acolyte nodded. “Nesar has many adherents in Emona. Their followers are among the most vocal. The dogma of change has done much for many people.”

The words were tactful, but there was no hiding the streak of exasperation in the acolyte’s voice. “But you disagree.”

Soft laughter. “Officially I should deny it. But Nesar is a strict, rigid deity. We children of Avuria believe in fluidity. It is difficult to find common ground.”

Here was proof that the Empire was not a monolith, that she was not a foreigner endlessly banging against solid stone but someone who could find kindred thoughts among the

places of the city. Anxiety seeped out of her. It was not quite an answer—but she'd have time to think things through later. “Thank you,” she said again.

“Think nothing of it. And remain as long as you wish.”

Leris let the breeze through the courtyard slide her eyes shut. “I will.”

\* \* \*

“Have you ever heard of someone’s swordform changing?” Leris tried to make the question sound casual.

They were in the ready room of the Arena Subterranea, three days later, preparing for their first bout. Or, rather, Gerthe was—Leris had already changed into her blood-red sarong and had nothing else to do.

“Of course,” said Gerthe. “So have you.”

“I have?”

“It was in the final years of Old Meruvion’s reign,” Gerthe quoted, “when young Livia rose to seek his Honour.”

“That doesn’t count. It’s not actually true. Is it?”

“Did Livia win the Emperor’s Honour when her swordform changed from sword to trident mid-match? Probably not. Did Meruvion recognise the omen and declare her his heir on the spot? No. But was she a sword before the match, and a trident after?” Gerthe shrugged. “Yes.”

Leris mulled this over. The thought was unsettling, and hearing Gerthe confirm it made it impossible to ignore. What was swordform if not the steady constant in her life when all else was uncertain? She'd come to rely on that certainty, but now the Empire was trying to undermine even that. "Have there been others?"

"Not in the archipelago. Would've heard. In the Empire? Who knows." Gerthe was looking at her still. "Why?"

"No reason," Leris said, perfectly aware that Gerthe wouldn't believe her but aware also that the terms of their friendship meant Gerthe would not pursue the matter.

Excepting its size and the melodrama of its location, the Arena Subterranea was not so different to its twin on Leshin. The ready room was in the same position, an underground room in an underground arena, even if it was large enough that Leris and Gerthe could conduct a conversation on one side and be perfectly confident the gladiators on the other wouldn't be able to eavesdrop. The bouts they'd gone to watch earlier in the week had proceeded as bouts always did, and the levels of skill on display were, if a little higher on average, not so high as to eclipse the best of Leshin Harbour.

Leris could do a perfectly good job pretending everything was the same as it was back home—right up until she remembered that this was not the end-of-season tournament in

the islands' largest arena. This was one night in one arena in one city amongst dozens. What awe the scale of the individual event failed to evoke was supplied instead by the knowledge of hundreds of others just like it every week of the year.

And so she focused on what was in front of her—in this instance a wall, and shortly afterwards, when a clerk called their names, the tunnel leading up to the arena. The light was better than she'd expected. There were shadows where a crafty pair of gladiators could hide, yes, but in exchange it was not as bright as she was used to, and she could see the other pair clearly.

“Swords,” Gerthe said.

Leris set her doubts aside. The familiar anticipation was there, the mix of nerves and excitement urging her to give in to the confidence of swordform—and if that confidence had been marred in days past, it was still intact enough for the thought to feel *right*. “No points there.” Leris took Gerthe's hand. “The whole city's lousy with them. Let's show 'em what a spear can do, why don't we?”

\* \* \*

They won the bout, and the one after that, and the evening felt so right to Leris that she barely even minded when the master of the arena politely made it clear that she was required to take her bow in human form. Afterwards, in the man's office,

was harder. Her fingers itched to take Gerthe's hand again, even as the more honest part of herself recognised that it might not be that easy any more.

Gerthe did the talking.

"One marvellous display tonight," the master of the arena said, beaming like a child who'd stumbled on a sugar tree. His command of the islander tongue was slightly halting. In an obscure way, it made Leris feel a little better. "I was wondering if you two would perhaps be interested..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I was considering asking in any case, of course, but this bout tonight, simply exceptional, and the games in honour of Nesar next week—would you be interested?" The master smiled. His hands flexed over and over, as if suffering under the strain of speaking a foreign language. "Higher class of competition, of course, but one great honour..."

Leris ought to say something. It had started with Nesar, this uncertainty that wound itself through her hearts, both of them, the human and the spear's—but it was so much easier to ignore the whole situation, to ignore the tiny underground room and the man sweating across the desk from them, and she could all but feel Gerthe's impatience rising next to her.

"Here to fight," Gerthe said. "Sounds like a good opportunity."

The master sighed in relief. “Oh, yes, one marvellous opportunity, many gladiators fighting, the young and the established. Who knows where you might end up!” He laughed, over-loud in the enclosed space. “One small matter—one ceremony before the games, of course, the gladiators must participate... But the priests will tell you what to do, there will be no problem.”

Gerthe hesitated—not quite long enough for Leris to marshal her thoughts and get a word in. “Fine.”

The master of the arena clapped his hands together. “It is agreed. Next week, the festival of Nesper. The beginning is at sun-down, but best you arrive earlier, the priests will make sure everything is in order.” He leaned over in his chair and rifled through a chest behind his desk. “And here, of course, one prize for the efforts of tonight.”

Gerthe took the purse from him. “Next week,” she said, and finally the conversation was over.

Leris followed half a step behind as they made their way back to their rented room. There was a small tavern adjoining the inn from underneath, accessible only from the Undercity, and Leris could hear the noise of gladiators, returned from matches all over the city, celebration and commiseration all rolled into a single ball of sound. On another night, on another island, she might have joined them. Tonight, she followed

Gerthe upstairs. The part of the inn aboveground was reserved for guests and was blissfully quiet as a result.

“You all right?” Gerthe said as she unlocked the door to their room. “Seem more up and down than usual.”

“Fine.” Leris sprawled backwards on her bed. “City’s still getting to me.”

“That bad?”

“No. Not all bad.” The room was lit only by moonlight. Leris closed her eyes regardless. “That’s up and down, too, I guess.”

“Thought you’d like it more.”

So did I, Leris did not say. “It’s just different. I feel like—maybe this is what I was looking for, but it’s not how I expected.” That wasn’t quite right. It was frustrating how difficult she was finding it to put her feelings into words. “And maybe not. It’s hard to tell. It’s like the city’s pulling me in different directions, and I only have my instincts to tell me which way is right for me.”

“Archipelago’s only a month away.”

“I know. Don’t worry. I’ll tell you the moment I want to turn back. For now... it still feels like this could be good for me.”

\* \* \*

“It is a ceremony of thanks.” The priest of Nesor was a short man dressed in dusky grey. He would have looked normal were it not for the patterning on his face: black fading into white, from one side to the other, the graduations in colour barely perceptible. “We thank Nesor for where we have found ourselves. All life is change, and change is Nesor’s domain. Our successes and our happiness are, therefore, to their credit.”

“Convenient,” Leris said. “Aren’t your deities supposed to have, I don’t know, more specific interests?”

Gerthe shot her a look. Leris ignored it. They were alone with the priest, hours before the games were scheduled to begin. The other competitors, she supposed, weren’t in need of a remedial lesson in Traitian theology.

The priest went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “Gladiators, in particular, are beloved of Nesor. Many of them come to fight as a way to escape a previous life and aspire to something new. In this way they revere Nesor, not merely by the change they bring about, but by the second chance they seek. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Leris said. She couldn’t argue with the sentiment—most of the gladiators she knew had a story to match the priest’s ideas—but was it really necessary to dress it up like this?

“In the ceremony, you must thank the past you have left behind, that has brought you to the present. And you must ask guidance for the future ahead, to receive the changes that will make you even more sacred in the eyes of Nesar.”

“Pretty,” Gerthe said. “How?”

The priest nodded pleasantly, in the manner of a teacher anticipating a question. “As gladiators, there is a special form to the ceremony. As you are, fundamentally, a pair, you must reflect the role of the pair in Traitian society. You will embody the normal lives that you have left behind: the life of the man and the life of the woman.”

Leris, thoughts wandering to the bout ahead, became instantly alert. Was it all a little too on the nose, or was she jumping at everything that reminded her of her past?

“We’re both women,” she said warily.

The priest’s smile was as implacable as the tide. “Even so.”

“It’s nothing to do with us,” she went on, louder than she’d intended. “Your “normal lives” are nothing like the archipelago.”

“And yet here you are,” he said. “In the Traitian Empire, there are prices to be paid.”

“And I suppose you get to choose, which way around it is?”

“Of course.” The priest looked affronted at the idea it might be otherwise. “It is always the participant’s choice. I have no desire to force you into performing a role you do not want.”

The wind left Leris’s sails. That wasn’t the “you” she’d meant—she’d been dead certain the priest himself would make the choice. If it was her choice, the picture she’d been constructing in her mind was untrue. Nesor’s priest wasn’t the enemy. Perhaps her worldview didn’t mesh with Nesor’s, but if she’d wanted to avoid that worldview, she could simply have refused to carry out the ceremony.

“That is how it is done,” the priest said after several seconds of silence. “I take it you have a preference?”

Suddenly she was thirteen again. That occasion had been different, of course—bigger and grander, as everything was bigger and grander when you were young, threads of ritual woven through every moment, every gesture, every outfit. It was as far removed from this quiet, nondescript office as Emona itself was from the archipelago.

And yet: it was the same, in miniature. The choice of a role to play, if only for a single ceremony—and wasn’t Nesor the deity of second chances? She’d made the wrong choice then. She could make the right one now.

“I will be the woman,” she said.

\* \* \*

Leris wasn't sure what she was expecting. To feel better right away, perhaps, but afterwards the moment felt much less portentous. She felt embarrassed having read so much into it.

"I want to be a gladiator," she said. Her voice was quiet, private. "I want to do what I'm good at without worrying that afterwards someone'll turn up and tell me I'm living my life wrong. I'm glad they gave me the choice, don't get me wrong, but is it so much to bloody well ask for to just *fight*? Why's it all gotta be so fraught?"

Gerthe was politely quiet.

"Yeah. I know. You said it wouldn't be any better here. Thanks for not rubbing it in."

They'd been coached and dressed and then left alone. Leris was in what she assumed was traditional women's clothing: rough homespun fabric, a long tunic over a pair of trousers, the kind of thing no one could possibly enjoy wearing, even before factoring in the symbolism. If anything, Gerthe looked even more out of place: her garment was a little like a sarong, only if someone had made a sarong three times too long and had then tried to hide the fact by winding it around themselves seemingly at random.

"Get through this," Gerthe said, "and it's just us again. Can't stop us fighting how we like, can they?"

“Not yet, anyway. Just watch, we do too well, maybe they decide only swords’re allowed.”

“Be its own sort of victory.”

“I guess so.” Leris rubbed her eyes. “Yeah. Agrippa saw something in us, right?”

“Might’ve just been polite.”

Leris laughed, only half-broken. “I thought you were giving me a pep talk.”

“Doesn’t matter if she was sincere. We lived up to it.”

“That’s true. Don’t know why I even care what she thinks. She probably loves the ceremonies. Remember the shrine on her boat? Devout woman, I bet. Traitians have so many goddamn deities you could spend all year doing nothing but putting on games in their honour. No wonder they pay her so much.”

“Leris,” Gerthe said, but she was smiling.

“Right. Getting on with it.” Leris looked down at the needle and cloth in her hands. She was halfway through a small piece of embroidery, a crude representation of a trireme in rough seas. That was the crux of the ceremony: a sacrifice—somehow it was always about sacrifice, in the Empire—representing their own hands’ work. “Seems unfair. You didn’t have to catch your own rabbit, but I have to do this from scratch.”

There was a bowl of blood on the table next to Gerthe. Beside it was a rabbit, freshly exsanguinated. “Technically, your rabbit. Next time you can slaughter it yourself.”

Leris wrinkled her nose. Everything was confused in the Empire, all the boundaries blurred. Here it was the men who hunted and the women who prepared the food. Gerthe, in the role of the man, should have provided a rabbit for Leris to dress. The priest had allowed that an evening in the middle of the city was not ideal timing for rabbit hunting. He’d provided one for Leris to prepare and, after brief reflection, decided it would be most appropriate for Gerthe to produce a piece of needlework instead: a form of art that, if Leris understood correctly, was feminine—unless it featured maritime motifs. The blood was therefore Leris’s to sacrifice, the embroidery Gerthe’s. No one had bothered to check they were sticking to the rules, though, and Leris wasn’t about to subject Gerthe to two hours of embroidery. She’d had plenty of practice decorating sails. It wasn’t so different. Kind of fun, even. “You think they really have to do this? The other gladiators, I mean?”

“Doubt it. Probably they get away with something more *symbolic*.” Gerthe pronounced that last word with an admirable level of distaste. “No point in these ceremonies if they all ignore their own rules.”

“No point except humiliating outsiders,” Leris said. A moment later her hand slipped and the needle dug into a finger, hard enough to sting without drawing blood, and she grimaced. “Sorry. I keep thinking I’m feeling better, and then suddenly it’s all bitter again. I hate what this city is doing to me.”

“You don’t have to rush it, you know. It’s okay to take a while to work through your feelings.”

Leris’s needle stilled, tip poking out through the loop of her last stitch. There wasn’t much to go on, this time, but Gerthe voluntarily talking about feelings?

“Ulmo?”

“Apologies.” There was no doubt: the easy smile was never Gerthe’s. “I just had to say, I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” Leris had never talked to Ulmo twice in the same week before. She felt oddly flattered.

“What you’re looking for. It’s choice, right? You hate it when someone’s life is dictated to them. Yours or anyone else’s.”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“It is, in the big things. You were denied a choice when you were thirteen, you’re making up for it now.” His smile took the bite out of being so casually analysed. “But I hadn’t realised

how it affected you in the small ways. A small expression of free will calms you. Hence...”

He gestured at the embroidery in her hands, that she needn't have been doing.

Interesting. She hadn't thought of it like that—it'd been the obvious thing to do, make it easier on both of them, that was all. “It's a bit weird how good you are at reading people.”

“I don't have much else to do, most of the time.”

“So why was it so important to tell me this now?”

“Because there's something you need to remember. No matter what happens today, you're here by choice. You left your own people by choice. You still can choose to leave behind their beliefs. If you can do those things, you can leave the Empire by choice, too.” Ulmo took her hand in his, in Gerthe's, and smoothed a calloused thumb over the place she'd pricked herself. “Don't let yourself be bound by anyone's past decisions, least of all your own. It's all right to change your mind.”

Leris wanted to be flippant. It would be easy to brush aside the words as intrusive, unwanted advice. And it was, in some sense. But he was also right. “I won't.”

“Good.” Ulmo looked delighted with himself. “We'll get through this. All three of us. And there'll be stories to tell, at the end of it all.” He looked like he was about to say more, but then he cocked his head. “Sounds like your friend is coming

back. Good luck, Leris. I don't get to say that often, but I always mean it."

Leris glanced at the door just as the priest stepped into the room. When she looked back, it was Gerthe returning her gaze.

\* \* \*

The Arena Subterranea had a ceremonial chamber. It wasn't a proper temple—or even a shrine—because that would require it be dedicated to a specific deity. Still, it was yet another way the arena diverged from what Leris was used to.

There was a large brazier in the middle of the room, right where the temple to Avuria had held a pool. It was easy to imagine the procession in the square, the endless stream of Nesor's acolytes, tossing their offerings into a fire like this one. The bowl of blood sat heavy in her arms. Was she supposed to pour it in or toss it, bowl and all?

Except for the priest, they were alone. Leris shook her head to clear it of the dancing shadows on the walls. There was nothing to fear. If anything, performing the ceremony before the other gladiators did was preferable. No chance of snide eyes, that way.

The priest was talking. Leris had imagined a Traitian religious ceremony to have a more bombast, a spot of chanting at the very least, but that was the right word: talking. If he weren't speaking Traitian, she'd have thought he was still

giving them instructions. The flames flickered. There was no sign of a response from his deity.

Presently the echoes died away. “Make your sacrifice,” he said.

Leris ascended the three steps up to the brazier. Easiest to get it over with, and she threw the bowl into the fire.

For a moment, nothing happened. There was a crackle where wet wood met flame, a hiss as the blood began to boil; and then the brazier erupted.

*Who are you?*

The flames roared up to the ceiling, burning away cobwebs and casting light on the carvings there, ancient things of amorphous shape. Gerthe stepped up next to her, and Leris wondered vaguely how she could bear the heat.

*You are caught between two blades. Do you know what they mean?*

Leris flinched. It was as if she could hear the distant voice of an adult raised in anger, berating her over some minor slight, some chore she’d done when it ought have been left to an aunt.

*You have tried to change yourself. Have you succeeded?*

The chamber shone. The stones themselves sang with light. There was no one beside her. Leris stepped forward.

*One or the other. That is my way.*

She wanted to sit down. She wanted her mother to whisper that it was all right, but even a parent's embrace could not ward against the heat of the flames.

*If you cannot choose, ask and I will do it for you.*

Leris blinked. The fire sizzled slightly. It was a poor, miserly thing, barely large enough to light the room. For no reason at all, Leris felt wrung out, like a carpet that had been hung up and beaten.

The priest glanced behind them, just for a second, but it was enough. Leris's heartbeat quickened as she spun on the spot. The chamber was no longer empty. For a split second, terror took her: that it was Kahana come for her after all, that she'd be dragged back to the archipelago and her family.

But no, it was Agrippa, and she spoke in a voice so leisurely it was as if they had all the time in the world: "Gerthe a Mnibo. By the word of Mniboan law, you are hereby placed under arrest for the murder of Ulmo a Mnibo. By the bond of friendship between Mnibo and Traitit, you will be judged here in accordance with our laws."

Leris felt two things in short succession. The first was an almost overwhelming sense of relief, that it was not her Agrippa was looking for, that it was not her who'd be dragged off by the soldiers that flanked her. The second, when she saw

Gerthe frozen in place, one hand trembling in a fist, was shame so acute it vanquished even the memory of relief.

Agrippa was still talking. “Leris. The Empire has no need of you. Leave now and you will not be followed.”

The words didn’t matter. Leris had heard what she needed to hear; anything else was a welcome distraction.

“We can take them,” she hissed to Gerthe. “Only two guards. They won’t expect a fight.” She tried to ignore the sword belted around Agrippa’s waist. The woman was in her fifties, her prime behind her, no matter how her reputation towered.

Gerthe stayed frozen in place a moment more. Then her hand shot out to find Leris’, not even trying to be subtle, and Leris had only a moment to appreciate the surprise on Agrippa’s face before swordform took her.

Every so often, when she was at her most introspective, Leris gave nourishment to a niggling worry. If it came down to it—if something important enough depended on it—she had the suspicion she could kill someone in swordform. When Gerthe hefted her, when the guards recovered from their surprise and drew their own weapons, the possibility that she was about to find out was suddenly, painfully present.

But something was wrong. Her balance was off. She couldn’t sense the fight the way she normally could, like the

wind right before it blew. When Gerthe lunged forward, her centre of gravity wasn't where it should have been, and she stumbled on the steps. Leris cast about frantically, trying to sense the guards, but her mind was full of hazy, uncertain images, and all she could do was urge Gerthe to raise her, to fight, but her follow was sluggish, there was something wrong with her, too, and Leris began to panic.

Whatever she had become, it was not the spear.

She was flung out of swordform and could not tell if it was Gerthe or one of the guards who'd done it. Her limbs felt sluggish, her body empty. She thought she smelled blood, and for one disoriented second all she could think to do was to climb the steps and feed the brazier another portion.

There was someone standing over her. It was easier, this way, somehow. Tension drained away. Leris closed her eyes and gave in.

\* \* \*

Leris lay on her back and tried to put events in order.

Her eyes were still closed. Opening her eyes would confirm the worst; it was better to think things through, first, remember the details, piece together what had happened. Then she would be ready, and if she opened her eyes to find it had not happened after all, the relief would be all the greater.

It was surprisingly easy to be dispassionate. Her mind ticked items off a list: they had been betrayed, most likely by more than one person, most likely acting on behest of Maria Agrippa. That much, at least, made sense. But it wasn't *her* who'd been betrayed, not really, and that was the part she couldn't get her head around. She'd been so focused on her own desire to get away, to leave her home far behind, that she'd never stopped to really think about Gerthe's reasons for doing the same. She could, just about, imagine a world in which Gerthe had been involved in something, a fight gone bad, perhaps, something the authorities on Mnibo might have been forced to call murder.

It was harder to understand how she could be wanted for the murder of a person Leris had spoken to earlier that day.

And then there was the axe. She couldn't know for sure that was what she'd become—all she knew was that it hadn't been a spear. But what else? The implications swirled. For the first time in a decade, her mind shied away from the thought of being in swordform again, and she could not tell if she was scared of becoming the axe again or of becoming the spear and finding it bereft of the comfort she had grown so used to.

Enumerating the facts was one thing. There was nothing useful to be gained from dwelling on them. Leris opened her eyes.

There was no relief forthcoming. She was in a small cell, barely large enough to fit two beds with the width of a third between them. The corridor outside was well-lit and there was the faint sound of footsteps above. Leris tried the bars. They were cold and unyielding, vertical as well as horizontal, the gaps between them too small for even a grasping hand. She'd read a story, once, about a pair of lovers unfairly imprisoned, who'd escaped their prison by taking turns to pass through the bars in swordform. The reality was disappointingly well-thought out: this was a cell designed with swordform in mind.

Not that it mattered. She was alone.

It was difficult to say how much time passed before that changed. Her mouth grew dry, but there was no water and she ignored it; she sat on the bed, back against the wall, arms wrapped loosely around her knees. She thought blank thoughts. When the door at the end of the corridor opened, she barely even noticed. It took the rattle of keys in the neighbouring cell for her to look up.

Gerthe looked terrible. Her eyes were unfocused, her hair matted with sweat. Leris could see white bandages through the tear in her clothes. They hadn't bothered to give her something clean to wear; the edges of the tear were still stained with blood.

Leris didn't dare say anything until the guard manoeuvred Gerthe into one of the beds, his attitude neither kind nor unkind, locked the cell behind him, and retreated through the door by which he'd entered. Then she said, "Gerthe?"

Her voice was weak from thirst, but it barely even registered in comparison to the tight, strained reply: "Gerthe isn't here right now."

Ulmo didn't elaborate. "I'm sorry," Leris ventured.

"You should be," Ulmo said, and Leris flinched. "If you hadn't wanted to come—if you hadn't insisted on staying—if you'd just thought about someone other than yourself—" He drew a shuddering breath and stood up, grunting with the effort, bracing himself against the bars between them. "Maybe Gerthe would still be here, and I wouldn't have to... to..." All at once he crumpled. The bed creaked beneath him as it caught his weight. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Oh, Leris, I'm so sorry. Forgive me. It's hard, Leris, it's so very hard."

Leris leaned forward until there was nothing but iron separating them. "It's all right," she said. It wasn't quite true. His words had hurt. She hesitated before asking the next question. "Will Gerthe be all right?"

"I don't know." Ulmo blinked. "I don't know. She's gone so far, I don't even know if she can hear me."

"I'm sorry to ask, Ulmo, but... what happened?"

His eyes unfocused again. “Gerthe doesn’t know how to fight with an axe,” he said, and Leris loved him for not putting that blame on her. “She was... she was hurt. We were hurt. But it’s not just that...” His voice grew distant, then sharpened again. “We’ve been avoiding Mnibo for so long. Now that they’ve found us... I don’t know. It’s like she just gave up. Gave up and went away.”

Leris weighed her next question carefully. “What can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Ulmo said. His eyes slid closed. “I don’t know.”

\* \* \*

When Leris opened her eyes again, there was someone in the cell with her, sitting calmly on the other bed.

“How did you get in here?”

It was absurd, under the circumstances, the reflex to scramble back and cast around for a weapon, and yet there was something comforting about it too, a sign that she wasn’t quite ready to accept whatever the world would throw at her.

“There are many places the devout can go, that ordinary people cannot.” There was something maddeningly familiar about their voice. “I thought you might find some use for one such as me.”

“I don’t believe in...” Belatedly the memory floated to the surface. “You’re the acolyte. From Avuria’s temple. How did you know I was here?”

The person pushed back their hood. They were bald, and young, and the smile at the corner of their mouth felt like the first kindness Leris had been shown in years. “Avuria cares for travellers and strangers,” they said. “And right now you are both.”

“What do you want?”

“To help you.”

“How?”

The acolyte leaned back and crossed their legs, for all the world as if they were sharing a comfortable patch of sand somewhere far away beneath the sun. “The priests of Nesor think that change is a thing that happens to people once, twice, perhaps three times in the course of a life. They think of it as a way to partition our lives. We change, and become someone new, and never look back.” The acolyte looked up. “Does that sound familiar?”

Leris swallowed. “I tried to change. It didn’t work.”

“Of course it worked.”

“It didn’t. I couldn’t stop looking back. I thought I had, but yesterday...”

“Leris.” The acolyte folded their arms. “Have the priests of Nesar shown any indication whatsoever that their philosophy is worth your time? *Your* time, specifically?”

Leris tried to remember if she’d ever mentioned her name. “I...” She thought of the procession she’d seen outside Nesar’s temple; the deep, instinctive discomfort she’d felt. “I guess not.”

“The priests of Karilion Raven-Eyed believe that a person’s fundamental nature is set in stone at the moment of their birth, and that one’s purpose in life is to become one’s true self. Nesar teaches that moments of change in life are sacred, to be revered and prepared for.” The acolyte waved a hand. “And who can say who is right? One philosophy works for some people, a second for other people. But you are not those other people. You’ve been off-kilter the entire time you’ve been in this city, haven’t you? You and Nesar simply don’t mesh.”

“They... did something to me. Changed me.”

“They did nothing of the sort. They have no power over you, Leris. All they can do is imply, and hope your mind does the work for them.”

“I don’t understand.”

The acolyte tapped one foot in irritation. “Does anyone ever travel in a straight line? We take detours. We retrace our steps. We discover more that way than we otherwise would.”

They frowned, thinking their words over. “So it is with people. Everything inside of us is who we are, even if we aren’t always aware of it. You haven’t failed, Leris. You’ve merely looked back and discovered a part of yourself you’d forgotten about. To a child of Avuria, that is nothing to be frightened of.”

“But that part... it’s not what I want to be.” Leris gritted her teeth. “It’s the opposite of what I want to be.”

“Is that so true?”

Leris opened her mouth to affirm it. The words died on her lips. Ever since her thirteenth birthday she’d regretted the choice she’d been forced to make, and here she’d been given another chance: for the purposes of a single ceremony, true, and yet a chance to confirm she knew who she was. No matter which way she looked at it, she was faced with a prickly truth: *it hadn’t worked*. On Farhome, faced with the same choice, it was rejection that had felt truer.

“Are you sure you know, exactly, who you want to be?” the acolyte said. “People are rarely just one thing or the other, you know. It’s one of those things we don’t talk about, because we love to see the world as simple. You must remember that who you are is a choice you are making, every day of your life. And who you choose to be can change. *Must* change. There is no other way to live.”

“It’s arbitrary.” Leris spoke slowly, thoughtfully. “One thing or the other. I thought I wanted choice, but... I’m not sure that’s enough.”

“Exactly!” The acolyte clapped their hands together. “When given a choice of two, Avuria’s path is to seek the third. That is the only true choice. A meaningful choice, grounded in yourself, not the people around you. Let yourself find your own way, even when that means wandering in the mists. One can never bind oneself to a specific path, not for good. Only other people can do that.”

It didn’t escape Leris that there was dogma here, too, and the fact that the words resonated far more deeply than Nesar’s, or Farhome’s, didn’t change that. But she was not Traitian. She could choose to take the peace and leave the rest behind.

“Will I ever be a spear again?” Part of Leris hated herself for asking, but it was important. Perhaps, she thought, it would be better if it weren’t so important after all, but here she was.

“One moment, when you let the axe show,” the acolyte said slowly, “especially under duress... Well. I can hardly speak for you, but does it seem like that would undo a decade of learning to be yourself? A person may contain many things and remain themselves.” They brought a finger to their chin, considering. “Perhaps you’ll learn to switch at will. Seems to me a smart gladiator could find a way to turn that to your advantage.”

A half dozen possibilities immediately occurred to Leris. “I’m not... I don’t know if I can do that. My swordform has always been so much of who I am. I don’t know if I can define it, and not the other way around.” She frowned. When she put it that way, it sounded bizarre. Backwards.

“The axe and the spear are just symbols. They mean what you want them to mean. They meant one thing when you were young, but that was a long time ago. Perhaps they mean something else now. Something unique to you.” The acolyte laughed. “See? Change again. It’s easy to make everything about change. That’s why the Nesperites are so obnoxious.”

Leris smiled weakly. “I’m still the woman I’ve always been.” It was half statement and half question.

The acolyte reached across the gap between them and took Leris’s hands in theirs. “You are who you are. You’ll always be her. The only thing that changes is who, exactly, she is.”

“I think... I think I can work with that.” Leris took a deep breath. “Thank you. Um.” She felt suddenly awkward, sharing such a small space with a complete stranger. “Who *are* you? Why are you here?” Why do you know so much about me?

The acolyte reached into their robes and drew out a small copper coin, still shiny with the water of the offering pool. “I’m the kindness given for a kindness shown.” They stood. “Good

luck, Leris a Leshin. May you travel far and find warmth at your destination.”

“Wait,” Leris said. “One more thing. Do you have any ideas for getting out of this cell?”

\* \* \*

“I have a plan.” They were the first words Leris spoke as soon as— As soon as what? She’d been waiting for Ulmo to wake up, but here he was, still and quiet in his cell but eyes very much open. Nor could she remember sleeping herself. It was as if she had simply skipped over whatever time had passed since the acolyte’s visit.

“Go on?”

Leris blinked confusion away. Ulmo’s eyes were focused on her. That was a good sign. “First,” she said, “and I really am sorry, but I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

“There was no use hoping I could avoid that, I guess.” Ulmo closed his eyes. “Wish Gerthe were here. Or maybe it’s better coming from me. She... she bore everything a bit more directly.” His words were coming more easily than they had been. Was it solitude that grounded him, or was the mere possibility of an escape enough? “So,” he said. “Guess you know Gerthe’s wanted. On Mnibo. For killing me.” He smiled. With his eyes still closed, the expression was unsettling.

“Right,” Leris said. “Explain to me how that makes sense.”

“I’m trying to think. There’s a lot of context. I’m not sure where to begin. Let’s see. Twins on Mnibo. We’re... revered, I suppose you’d say. Regular twins too, but especially mind-twins. It’s a bit like the Empire, actually. If you imagine some kind of twin-deity, we’d be the priests. Only we don’t do deities on Mnibo, so it’s just us. Make sense?”

Leris nodded. Tried not to show her impatience. Their time in the cell had seemed interminable a minute ago, but now that there was information to acquire and a plan to formulate, it felt like someone might enter at any moment to take them away.

“There are lots of rules for us. We’re taught to share our bodies, to maintain our identities, there’s all sorts of little rituals. And that’s the important bit. Sharing. Each twin gets their time in the sun, so to speak.”

This next part Leris could guess. “You were different.”

“Right. You saw me, when they brought me back to the cell. I... I don’t handle people well. Remember when we met?”

“Of course.”

“Well, there you go. When I know someone, and like them, and trust them enough, it’s okay. I can talk to you now and feel fine. But as soon as there’s more than one person, or there’s a crowd, or even just voices in the next room over...” He sighed. “Let’s just say, I like it just fine in the back of my own head. It’s

how I am. And Gerthe understood. She didn't mind taking the lead, most of the time. I'd come out and talk to our friends, our family. It was nice."

Leris had seen Gerthe struggle through her share of social situations. "I don't think I could be that selfless," she said. "I don't think I ever properly appreciated what she does, until now."

"You don't know the half of it." Ulmo's smile was blurred around the edges with sadness. "But, yes, certain elements of Mniboan society didn't approve of how we chose to live. The rules are very clear." He tilted his head back. "And the reason for that," he said carefully, "is that on Mnibo, the greatest crime it's possible to commit is siblicide. Bad enough for a sister to kill her brother. Worse if they're twins. Even worse if they're mind-twins. And the first sign, we're taught, is when one twin begins to spend more time in control. The more time spent in your own mind, the theory is, the more likely you are to simply disappear one day."

"And... that's it? They think Gerthe killed you because, what, you don't come out as much?"

"It's a little more complicated than that. Partly it's about the precedent. The fact that I exist, happily, as I am... Well, that undermines a lot of our most important teachings, and the people in charge on Mnibo don't much like that sort of thing."

“I’m starting to see why you were sympathetic when I told you *my* story.”

Ulmo snorted. “It’s dull, really, isn’t it? A hundred different stories, and at their heart the same basic issues.”

“I don’t suppose you could just talk to them.”

“I doubt the imperials even believe I exist. They think Gerthe killed her normal brother, in a normal sort of way. As for the Mniboans, I honestly don’t know if they believe it, either, or if it’s more a matter of principle.”

“Which brings us to the next question,” Leris said, frowning.

Ulmo nodded. “Why in the world is Agrippa acting on behalf of Mnibo?”

“I heard something on Farhome,” Leris said, tapping her fingers idly against the bars. “That Agrippa had been out to Mnibo. Maybe she made some kind of deal. They give her... something, and she deals with Gerthe.”

“Right,” Ulmo said slowly. “The rest of the archipelago refuses to enforce Mniboan law. Too much animosity, too many misunderstandings. That’s why we don’t like leaving the islands, Gerthe and I. Bit of a paradox, really, but it’s safer closer to Mnibo.” He cleared his throat. “But if Mnibo had something to offer the Empire... Well, then all Agrippa has to do is lure us out where she has the authority to act.”

Leris winced. “Sorry. Should’ve listened to Gerthe. Stayed on Leshin.”

“Not your fault. We made the same mistake once. With less dramatic consequences, I grant you.”

“So, what’s Agrippa getting out of this?”

“Does it matter?”

“Guess not.” Leris pursed her lips. “The good news is none of this affects my plan.”

“Go on, then. What’s the plan?”

Leris told him.

\* \* \*

Three hours later, something finally happened. There were four guards this time, two to stand back and look intimidating and two to bring them something to eat and a change of clothes. “Eat fast,” one of them said, and in so doing appeared to exhaust his stock of the islander tongue.

The food was filling, but Leris hadn’t been locked up quite long enough to appreciate bread and olives halfway to being inedible. The clothes were a different matter. Some kind soul had saw fit to provide Leris with a proper sarong, pink with dark blue patterning. It was the sort of thoughtfulness that made her wish she could have seen the best of the Empire rather than the worst.

Fed and clothed, the guards led them out of the prison. The stairs opened onto a side corridor, from which Leris could hear the bustle of a public building. Part of her was surprised—she'd been imagining dungeons deep beneath the ground, not a functional set of holding cells in what she was quickly realising was a courthouse. Whenever the Empire's reputation for melodrama met its reputation for functional bureaucracy, the latter won out.

Their hearing—Leris hadn't been sure that there would be a hearing, but it seemed a safe enough guess—was functional through and through. The courtroom was small, a dais at the end for the judges, a bench in the middle for the accused, a space by the door for the guards to loiter. There were two other people seated on the dais, but Leris had eyes only for Agrippa.

“Gerthe a Mnibo,” Agrippa said without preamble. “You are charged with the murder of your brother Ulmo. How do you respond?”

Ulmo was visibly trembling. “Gerthe not here,” he got out. “I *am* Ulmo.”

“Lies,” the man seated next to Agrippa said. He was large, dark-skinned, and—Leris's heart skipped a bit as she wondered how she'd not realised it immediately—obviously Mniboan. “Anyone capable of so grave a crime is capable of any measure of deception to evade justice.”

It sounded so weak to Leris, so obviously made-up, that for a second she thought it would be over there and then. But Ulmo had been right: there was a polite expression on Agrippa's face as she nodded, the look of someone who was humouring a foreigner's beliefs.

"Let the record state the accused has denied the charge." Agrippa sounded bored. "Leris a Leshin. You are charged with attempted assault of a representative of the law. How do you respond?"

"Guilty as charged," Leris said, with some relish.

Agrippa flicked dust off her fingernails. "Gerthe a Mnibo. Your guilt has been established by the law of your own people. There is no need to try you again. Leris a Leshin. You admit your crime. There is no need for a trial. Unless the accused have anything to add, we will proceed—"

"Actually," Leris said, "I want to say something." She took a moment to enjoy the extent to which Agrippa had not been expecting to be interrupted, then went on: "I demand trial by combat."

Agrippa twitched. "You can't. There will be no trial."

"Course I can." Something about the moment reminded Leris of those first few seconds in a bout, the world reduced to its most simple elements. She made her voice grand. "Did you not stand accused once, and your partner beside you, and listen

to the tribunal pass judgement? And did you not demand the right of combat, and fight for your freedom?” She tugged at the seahorse pin that still hung faithfully from her sarong. “You claim I am recognised by your laws. So recognise me. Let us fight.”

Leris held her breath. This was a calculated gamble: Agrippa had been a servant citizen before that tribunal, and only the presence of her partner had granted her a full citizen’s right of combat. Leris was loathe to exploit that history for her own gain, but if even a small part of Agrippa remembered what it was like to stand helpless and be judged...

Someone laughed, and Leris never learnt if Agrippa was as principled as that. All eyes turned to the other woman on the dais. “She has you there, my friend. No one could deny the charges against us, and still we fought.”

It had been so easy to ignore her. She was dressed simply. She had none of Agrippa’s beauty. It had been so easy to dismiss her as a clerk. No doubt that was her intent. Hers was the kind of face one saw every day—was quite literally a face Leris saw every day, but she looked older than she did on the coins, less like a marble statue and more like a living figure, her eyes bright and amused. A woman to love, the stories went, because to fear her was to be driven insane.

“If it is a trial by combat you want,” Livia said, and her voice was the law: “then it is a trial by combat you shall have.”

\* \* \*

“A sound plan,” Ulmo had said, through the bars of his cell after Leris finished explaining what she had in mind. “Just one problem.”

Leris looked up. It seemed childishly unfair that there should be anything wrong with an idea she’d barely spent ten minutes thinking about. “What?”

“I can’t fight.”

“What do you mean, you can’t fight?”

Ulmo raised one hand, pantomimed holding a spear. “I have the muscle memory, sure, but that’s not enough. Gerthe’s the fighter. I’m more in the way of a thinker. Besides,” he added, indicating his side, “I’m not exactly in tip-top condition.”

No matter how often it was pointed out to Leris, there always came another moment in which she was blindsided by the fact that Ulmo and Gerthe were, truly, different people. “All right then,” she said. “Guess it’s out of the comfort zone for both of us.”

\* \* \*

And so the ready room again.

There were guards this time, in place of other gladiators, but that was not so different that Leris couldn't pretend it was all just another night of bouts. Harder to ignore was the total lack of noise from above. The Arena Subterranea sat all but empty, and she wondered if that was how it had been when Agrippa and Livia had fought for their lives. It felt wrong that a fight of such importance might have lacked a commensurate audience; but then, they hadn't been Aedile and Empress then. The present moment cared little for the history it would become.

Ulmo was sitting opposite her, going through the motions of strapping on Gerthe's armour. They'd found it where they'd left it before the Nesperite ceremony. It was a lonely thought: one set of armour, hanging unused, while the rest of the room spun with activity. She wondered if any of the other gladiators had seen it and noted their absence.

Footsteps on the stairs. Leris looked up at the newcomer. Antion. There was a beat as they stared at each other. "Funny thing," she said. "The further west we go, the less I like you."

His smile, never strong, crumpled. "I thought you might appreciate a friendly face."

"A friendly face? The last time I saw you, you were working for the woman who just *locked us up*, and you thought I'd consider you a *friendly face*?" Leris barked out a laugh. "I

guess I should be surprised. But seems I'm fresh out of surprise."

"Leris..."

"What? Are you here to break us out? Smuggle us away and back to the archipelago?"

"No."

"Then what's the point?"

"The point is I'm sorry!" His expression was twisted up like a knot in a tree. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened and that—that will happen. I didn't want this."

Leris wasn't feeling charitable. "What *did* you want, exactly?"

"Listen—"

"No, really. If you can't help us, at least tell me *why*. What's this all been about? Why does Agrippa care about any of us?" Leris was on her feet, advancing on him. "Why am I on the brink of throwing my life away, Antion? Can you tell me that?"

His response was so mumbled Leris could barely hear him. "Staging rights."

"*What?*"

"Staging rights," Antion repeated, more clearly. "The Empire was feeling... stymied in the archipelago. Maria Agrippa thought, perhaps, Mnibo would be more willing to

listen. Isolation and all, you know.” He swallowed. “They offered better terms on trade. A staging area for a small military force. In exchange for first choice of imperial trade routes, and a... a stronger presence around the islands, should the Empire ever find itself in a position to expand.”

Leris became aware of Ulmo, sitting perfectly still, listening with his whole body. “Your *fucking* Empire,” she spat, as much to spare him the necessity of a response as to vent her own anger. “Can’t it just leave well enough alone? Some islands are already half-imperial, you must know that. Isn’t that *enough*? A middle ground, somewhere we can both exist? Why—why does it have to be *you*, all the fucking time?”

“It... I don’t know. I don’t know, all right?” Antion backed away until one foot was on the lowest step. “Just *listen*.” He paused to see if Leris would obey. “I was the point of Agrippa’s spear on this. I went to Mnibo and the other rimward isles. And you’re right. You’re right! I wasn’t lying when I said I was barely from the Empire. I liked what I saw. I don’t *want* it to change.”

“Great,” Leris said. “I hope there’s more to this, because your noble regret isn’t really moving me.”

“You have to understand,” Antion barrelled on, words coming louder and faster. “Agrippa, she’s just one person in the Empire. An important person, but there are other important

people, with other ideas.” His eyes were suddenly bright. “But there’s only one person that really matters. This thing with Gerthe, it was meant as a proof of intent. A favour the Empire would do for Mnibo. And if it all falls apart, right there in front of the Empress... Well, who can say what Livia might think about future relationships with the archipelago?”

The question rooted Leris’s anger to the spot. She hadn’t truly believed he was here for any reason other than to make himself feel better, and her mind was still racing to catch up to the implications. “You mean...”

“If you win today,” Antion said, enunciating each word carefully, “if you and Gerthe leave the Empire as free women... I think it would sway her.”

There was a long silence. Then Ulmo laughed, the kind of laugh that would have got him strange looks in polite company.

“Well,” he said. “No pressure, huh?”

\* \* \*

“Nothing about this day has been in my comfort zone,” Ulmo had said. As if to illustrate his point, he had wedged himself across the width of the cell, feet on one set of bars and back to the other. “One more thing isn’t liable to break me.”

“Forgive me if this is a stupid question, then.” Leris took a deep breath. “Do you have a swordform?”

Ulmo stilled. He'd only been leaning against the bars, idly running his fingers over them but now even the faint sound of skin on metal was gone. "Yes," he said, and it couldn't have been more obvious the question sat heavy on his mind.

"And," Leris went on, "are you willing to use it?"

"Yes," Ulmo said again, but still there was that quality to his voice. "Most of the time, I have no body of my own. Losing myself in swordform is hardly a concern."

"But?"

"But Gerthe's in here too. Even—even if she's absent right now."

Leris said nothing for several long moments. "I don't want to ask you to do anything she'd object to," she began.

Ulmo cut her off: "And I won't make you. There's no other way. That's clear enough. If it goes well, and she comes back to me afterwards, well... We'll work it out. And if it doesn't..." He shrugged. "Then it doesn't."

\* \* \*

The tunnel was draughty. Leris's sarong flapped around her, knotted behind her neck like she preferred. Belatedly it occurred to her the imperials might have lent her a set of armour, if she'd asked. This was to be a trial, after all, and there were proper ways of doing things. But perhaps it was better

this way. Comfort and familiarity were more important than a bit of extra protection.

There was no master of the arena, no gong, no crowd. Only a pair of guards behind her and Ulmo, motioning them out onto the sand. The silence got to her. When Leris got right down to it, she was a performer. The sand was her stage. Without an audience, she was—what? A young woman with altogether too much riding on her. Leris closed her eyes. Just another bout. Nothing she hadn't done a hundred times before.

Except it was, of course. She'd never fought with Ulmo before.

They came to a stop at the centre of the arena, twenty paces from Agrippa. In a trial by combat, it was the judge who appointed a champion. Leris was not remotely surprised that Agrippa had chosen herself. It was too dark to make out who her partner was, standing a pace behind her, but it certainly wasn't the Empress, as part of her had been expecting. That was good. Three decades past her prime or not, no sane gladiators would willingly choose a fight against Livia Aurelia to bet their lives on.

“The trial will follow gladiators' laws.” Livia's voice rang out from the Imperial Box. Other than her, the Mniboan judge, and a pair of clerks, the arena was deserted. “First blood. Best

of five.” She looked straight at Leris. “The accused will fight in their own names?”

It took Leris a moment to realise a response was expected. “Yes,” she called, her voice disappearing into the dimness.

Livia turned to Agrippa. “Who champions the law?”

“Maria Agrippa, Aedile of Traitii.” Agrippa gestured at her partner. “And her nephew, Antion.” Antion was in swordform now, and the two of them looked like a mural on the side of a civic monument: the Aedile wielding the Traitian shortsword, unassuming yet symbolic of something vast.

Leris resisted the urge to laugh. “Really?” she said instead, so only Ulmo could hear. “Somehow he failed to mention that part.”

“So it shall be,” Livia said, and the words filled the arena like wax imprinting on a seal. “The accused fight for their freedom. The law fights...” And suddenly it was as if a mask had fallen away, Livia Lawgiver replaced by Livia the woman, and she said in a voice full of harsh humour: “In this instance, perhaps, the law fights for something more than its own honour. Let us see, Maria, if your blade can convince where your words have only enticed.”

Agrippa met the Empress’s gaze. It was a moment of such dangerous familiarity, the weight of decades of love and hate so transparently contained in the air between Livia and her

erstwhile partner, that for a single heartbeat Leris wouldn't have traded places with Agrippa.

Then it was over, Agrippa looking away, Livia's face once again the obverse of a coin.

"Begin," the Empress said.

\* \* \*

"All right," Leris had said. "We'll make it up to her, the both of us."

"Forgive me," Ulmo said, "but are you up to your end of the task? Only I thought you weren't too keen on following."

Leris rubbed her temples. "Let me worry about that," she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "Next: I don't suppose your swordform's a spear? All this won't matter much if I can't actually fight with you."

Ulmo shook his head. "Sorry."

"What is it, then?"

\* \* \*

Ulmo's hand was clammy in hers. He was so much bigger, it felt absurd that their positions were reversed. Surely he was the one who would ground her, who would look after her while she went around the business of winning the fight—but he was not Gerthe. He had none of her experience. And if he could not wield a weapon, he would have to be the weapon.

Leris told herself she knew what she was doing. She'd fought with half a dozen other gladiators before Gerthe, short-lived partnerships all, but they hadn't been as accommodating as Gerthe, hadn't been so willing to let her lead in every fight. It was simple, really. Even as she fretted, she felt the strange cold heat on her palm that accompanied the transformation, and all at once Ulmo was gone and she was holding a dagger, nearly the length of her forearm, the blade simple and unadorned, the hilt set with a single amber gemstone.

\* \* \*

“A knife?” Leris had breathed a sigh of relief. “I can work with a knife.”

\* \* \*

The tricky part was maintaining it.

She was aware of Agrippa advancing, slowly, wary perhaps of some hidden stratagem, but Leris had no attention to spare her way. All her concentration was focused on Ulmo. She felt a stab of jealousy—it was supposed to be her in his place, all instinct and sensation—and fought it down before it could get in the way, but it was too late, her focus was gone and in its place the old fear of losing herself, of being so focused on her partner that, when it came time to be herself again, she would forget who that was.

Ulmo reappeared next to her, off-balance, and let go of her hand. “No!” Leris cried, but he was too inexperienced to remember the all-important physical contact, and before either of them could react Agrippa darted forward and pricked Leris neatly in the shoulder.

“One to the law.” Livia’s voice was utterly disinterested, for all the world a scorekeeper with nothing at stake. “Again.”

The scratch was tiny, barely a puncture at all. Leris tried to put it out of her mind as they took up their position again, facing Agrippa across an expanse of white sand now stained with a few drops of Leris’s blood. She could see the expression on Agrippa’s face: the impersonal determination of someone removing an obstacle. Her plan was at risk; Leris was in the way. Something told her Agrippa had no intention of switching with Antion.

“Let me lead this time,” Leris said.

“What? Leris, I told you, I can’t fight—”

“I know. Just trust me.” Ulmo hesitated a second then nodded, and Leris wished she could trust herself as easily. “Do your best. Don’t worry if she gets you. Makes the comeback more dramatic, right?” She tried a smile.

“Begin.”

Leris hadn’t felt at peace since that tiny tournament on the tiny, forgotten atoll in the rimward isles. Now she let herself

succumb to all the stresses she'd been operating under: the drive to see the Empire, curdled now into something distasteful; the stop on Farhome, the conversation with Kahana; and the reality of Emona, huge and careless of her comfort. Then she fell into swordform.

She was an axe again, she could tell, but then that was the point—it was like pushing a fishhook caught in your finger the rest of the way through, decisive and deliberate, anticipating the rush of blood that came before the bandage. She forced herself to *be* the axe, to feel every inch of it the way she felt the spear. There was the panic she'd felt during the ceremony, at suddenly finding herself changed, and there the doubt that had followed. But blood held no fear when it was called forth deliberately, and even those emotions could affect her only so much when she had brought them down on herself.

A memory came to Leris, clearer than any she'd ever had in swordform. She was nine. Her father was by her side, axe in hand, showing her how to harvest greenwood. His careful, precise blows succeeded where her flailing failed. Later he would show her how the nomads used greenwood to bind their boats together. Later still, her mother taught her how to sharpen a blade. Leris had practiced on the same axe. She remembered the sun on her back and the hot sand between her toes; she remembered being happy.

On its heels came other images: the time a storm had nearly separated one hull of the catamaran from the other, and she'd been forced to improvise a fix out of brittle, too-young greenwood; an evening spent weak and sweating in the shade of a tree as she taught Gerthe how to harvest the bark that was the nomads' cure for fever; digging for yams on a tiny atoll when it was Gerthe suffering through a rare illness and they had precious little fresh food.

She still had that axe. It was in one of the chests on their catamaran. It had been part of her life for over a decade and a half. Her life—not family's. How strange, that she'd forgotten where it came from.

Her awareness of the fight grew sharper. What had been vague impressions of movement resolved into the reality of Ulmo, scrambling back, avoiding Agrippa's blows only by yielding step after step. Leris knew instantly it was too late to do anything—even if it had been Gerthe following and not Ulmo, her senses were still shaky, more muddled than she was used to, and she couldn't have led properly—and a moment later Ulmo was up against the wall of the arena.

To Agrippa's credit, she only nicked his arm. It would sting, to be sure, but there were gladiators who would have pressed the advantage, inflicted a deeper wound to sap their opponent's energy.

Leris came out of swordform in time to hear Livia say, “Two to the law. Again.”

“What was that for?” Ulmo said, his voice shaky, one hand covering his wound. Agrippa was already halfway back to her starting position.

“Introspection,” Leris said. She ignored Ulmo’s baffled look. “Give me your hand.”

Ulmo’s swordform came easier now. There was no rule that said she had to rush back for the next point. She took her time, testing the weight of his blade, getting used to the balance. The voice was still there, in the back of her mind, that had always stopped her following: *if you forget about yourself for too long, maybe you won’t be you when you remember again, ignore Ulmo, remember yourself, remember yourself—*

Leris let it wash over her. The spear was not all she was. She had lost it, once, and remained herself, and it was that which made the difference. It was impossible to fear a loss she’d already overcome. It was like carrying a bowl filled to the brim with water. The more you looked at it, the shakier it became—but take your eyes off it, trust your balance, and the walk became effortless. The more she clung to her own swordform, the harder it was to focus on Ulmo’s. The trick was to trust that what you couldn’t see would still be there when

you came back for it. The spear would still be there when she came back for it.

She came to a stop ten paces from Agrippa. The sand around her feet was scuffed. “Besides, better an axe than a fucking sword,” she added, out loud, loud enough to be heard even in the Imperial Box.

“Begin.”

Whatever positive opinion Agrippa had formed of Leris’s abilities after the tournament on Leshin, it had clearly been discarded on the evidence of the last five minutes. She dispensed with caution and drove in fast, sword raised for the kind of overpowering blow Gerthe was fond of when fighting someone less experienced.

Leris sidestepped, reversed her grip on Ulmo, and caught Agrippa a glancing strike on the shoulder as she went by.

“One to the accused.” Livia sounded satisfied, like a connoisseur who’d been worried she wasn’t getting her money’s worth. “Again.”

Agrippa was examining the blood on her fingers with, if not exactly disbelief, at least a faint sense of surprise. When she looked at Leris, there was no anger in her gaze, only curiosity.

Leris could have spent hours discussing the matter with her. Instead, she shrugged.

“Begin.”

Leris dropped into a fighting stance. Agrippa wouldn't fall for the novice gladiator act again, for all that it had very nearly not been an act at all. She was circling, wary, sword raised—and it was almost impossible to remember her lead was Antion, so single-minded was her style—and Leris matched her, step for step.

This was the kind of fighting she hated. Better to close the distance and get it over with. But some gladiators loved to draw it out, try and goad their opponents into a mis-step—

Leris nearly missed the moment Agrippa broke stride and went for her. She got Ulmo up just in time, deflecting Antion's longer blade to the side, so close to her skin she half expected the wake of his passing to inflict the decisive cut. Before she could even think about going on the offensive, Agrippa was there again, and it was all Leris could do to keep Ulmo between her and Antion. She hadn't fought with blade in hand for years, and it showed: each parry sent vibrations up her arm, until she started to think she'd just shake herself apart and be done with it.

Finally Agrippa overextended, lunging left, and Leris darted right, the instinct to put sand between her and Agrippa eliminating any chance of taking the opening. The wall was alarmingly close on her right and she turned and ran, stopping

only when she was in the dead centre of the arena, avenues of escape in every direction.

So it went: Leris, smaller, faster, but utterly unable to get near Agrippa. In the stories, it was the underdog who usually won that kind of battle. That was scant comfort every time Leris deflected a blow at the last moment, every time she barely avoided being pinned against the wall. And time never favoured the small and quick: Leris could feel herself getting tired, feel her reflexes slowing, and where Agrippa had Antion to correct for her own lapses, Ulmo wasn't trained, didn't know how to nudge his swordform so that it was in just the right place to create an opening.

In the end, luck decided the matter. Leris was half a second too slow one too many times, and Agrippa finally had her up against the wall, sword drawn back to strike. Cornered and beaten, Leris did the only thing she could think of: she threw herself forward, trusting to the nature of swordform to protect her from serious harm, the tip of Ulmo's blade seeking anything, the slightest patch of exposed skin—

There came the whisper-quick sound of fabric parting before a blade, followed immediately by metal sparking off the stone wall. It took her a few seconds to understand what had happened. Antion's blade sat flat against her side, all but

tucked under her arm, his point wedged in the wall behind her. She hardly dared move for fear of cutting herself.

Then Livia said, “Two to the accused,” and Leris looked up in wonder at the spot on the side of Agrippa’s neck where Ulmo had scored the smallest cut. “Again.”

Agrippa removed sword from wall and stalked back to the centre of the arena. Leris stayed where she was, sarong soaked through, sweat stinging the cut on her shoulder. She let Ulmo fall from half-numb fingers, and he was human again before he even hit the ground.

“Leris? What are you doing?”

She ignored him. “I don’t know if you can hear me, Gerthe, but I want you to know I’m sorry.” She swallowed back the beginnings of tears. “I was selfish. I should have listened to you. I was too quick to accept it when you let me have my way. I should have pushed harder. I thought, if we came here, and the people were different, I could just...”

“Doesn’t matter. See, it’s not about other people. “Cept maybe the important ones. And I think I know who I am. *Really* know, I mean. I hope you’d be proud, if you could see us. And the more I think about it, the more I think you always knew, a little, and if I hadn’t been so sun-bleached stubborn maybe I could’ve worked out that’s what really matters.” She paused, gave that thought the honesty it deserved. “Or maybe

not. Anyway. When we do something together—it should be enthusiastic, you know? Both our dreams. Not just mine.” Leris’s breath was coming hard.

“I don’t think I can win this, Gerthe. Not alone. Oceans know you’ve looked out for me before, and believe me, I wish I could do it for you, just this once. But I don’t think I can. I’m sorry. I need you. *We* need you.” She looked up into Ulmo’s wide eyes and mustered the energy for a crooked grin. “If you’re going to forgive me, now’s the time. Should have said something sooner, maybe, but there it is.” She waited a moment for a reply she knew wasn’t coming. “Right. That’s all. I think they’re getting impatient.”

Ulmo steadied her as they made their way back to the centre of the arena. She felt the eyes tracking their progress. It was strange. She should have felt elated. Two points they’d been on the brink, and two points they’d won. But there was no fooling the exhaustion deep in her bones.

“Decisive point,” Livia said, and the hunger in her voice scared Leris a little. “Begin.”

Whatever energy had been sustaining Leris through the fourth point fled. Her limbs felt heavy. She didn’t even take Ulmo’s hand until Agrippa had covered half the distance between them, and even then his swordform came sluggishly,

reluctantly, and Leris closed her eyes when Agrippa swung, her hands coming up in one last, instinctive block.

The sound of metal on metal was the purest thing Leris had ever heard. She opened her eyes.

She was on her knees. Agrippa stood above her, statuesque, staring down. And there, Antion's blade, a mere inch from her cheek: but caught between the crossed blades of not one but two knives, identical in every respect but for the purple and amber gems in their hilts.

Shock reigned for three full seconds. Then Leris threw herself to the side, rolling awkwardly but somehow finding her feet nonetheless, flush with a manic energy that she knew, beyond a doubt, would disappear as quickly as it had appeared. Agrippa was only now turning to face her. The better part of ten paces separated them. Leris's muscles were already protesting again, and she had to end it, now, before another move was taken.

There was only one thing to do. Leris raised her hand and threw.

It shouldn't have worked. Leris herself could maintain swordform without physical contact, but that was for the same reason she found it so hard to follow. Gerthe, who loathed swordform almost as much as Leris relished in it, should have become human again almost instantly. But Leris still held the

other blade, and for once the lesson went the other way: different people, yes, but also the same, and so long as she had a grasp on one twin's swordform, she had them both.

The dagger that was Gerthe arced through the air—awkwardly, because it was not weighted for throwing, and even if it had been Leris didn't know what she was doing—and if that knife had been a mundane weapon, the throw would have missed ten times out of ten. But it was not, and it struck true, drawing a line of blood across Agrippa's cheek.

Livia did not seem particularly surprised. “Three to the accused,” she declared. “Well, well. Look how the law is beaten.”

No one seemed inclined to respond. Leris took the opportunity to collect the second knife. She had no idea what would happen if she dropped Ulmo while Gerthe lay on the sand a dozen yards away, and she didn't intend to find out. As soon as she picked the knife up, though, both blades vanished from her grip, and there was Gerthe standing next to her, as if nothing had changed. For one mortifying moment Leris found herself on the verge of tears.

Agrippa spoiled everything. “Not beaten,” she snarled, and the anger that had been absent the entire fight was finally there. “The accused cheated. They forfeit the match.”

Leris was drawing herself up to respond, but Livia beat her to it. “Explain,” she said mildly.

“Ask any child in the streets,” Agrippa said. Her voice was raised, as if the amphitheatre was full of people and she wished her oration to reach every last one of them. “One person, one swordform. No exceptions. The law is equally clear. Gladiatorial matches are between *pairs* of gladiators. And yet here we have one woman wielding two blades. Three people in total. They are in breach of the law. The fight is void.”

“A compelling point,” Livia said. “You fought well, Leris a Leshin, but if you cannot present a convincing explanation, I’m afraid I must agree with the honourable Aedile.”

Later, Leris would shiver to remember how close she’d come to missing it. It was such a small thing, and she was so tired, and she’d tried so hard—it would have been so easy to just *stop*.

But it was right there, their freedom, for the taking. “Three people,” she called out. “And who do you suppose is the third?”

Agrippa’s stare was perfectly blank, but out of the corner of her eye, Leris could see the Mniboan representative stiffen.

“You see as clearly as I do that there are only two of us here. There is only one explanation.” Leris ignored everyone else, looking straight at Livia. “One of us is two people. Gerthe is a Mniboan twin. Her brother, Ulmo, shares her body. They

are both here. They both fought. Declare us forfeit if you like. But if you do, all you're doing is admitting that the crime we're on trial for never happened in the first place. Either we have won our freedom, or we were innocent to begin with."

The Mniboan in the Imperial Box was whispering something to Livia. Off to the side, Leris was vaguely aware of Agrippa hissing something about foreign cultural beliefs not trumping Traitian law. None of it mattered. It was as if they were standing side by side, Leris and the Empress, staring into each other's eyes: one to make the case and one to weigh it.

Then a new voice cut in: Antion, human again and forgotten at Agrippa's side. "Empress Livia," he said. "Far be it from me to claim the wisdom to make this judgement. I offer only the experience of my own eyes. I have spent more time on Mnibo than any other citizen I know. On my family's name—and here he cast a glance at Agrippa—they tell the truth. If we accept that swordform is possible, that one person can inhabit two bodies, it seems to me not so much harder to accept the opposite."

Livia was silent a moment longer. "Ulmo a Mnibo," she said, "attest to your presence."

Ulmo's voice was strong and steady. Leris felt a surge of pride. "I am Ulmo. Alive and well, as you can see."

Silence again. Then Livia stood. “It would be a boring world indeed,” she said, “if it did not hold the capacity to surprise us from time to time. The facts are clear,” she declared. “There was no crime here. Leris, Gerthe. Ulmo. You are free to go, with the Empire’s apologies for your treatment.”

“They resisted arrest!” Agrippa snapped. “That alone is grounds for—”

“They resisted *illegal* arrest,” Livia said. “Let us clear the matter up, just in case: Leris a Leshin and Gerthe a Mnibo are hereby pardoned of any crimes they may have committed heretofore, in the Empire or outside it. The matter is closed.”

It was an open question whether Agrippa or the Mniboan were more liable to explode. Neither did.

“Good.” Livia turned back to Leris and Gerthe. “That said, I fear tempers are rather high. I do not wish to compel free citizens of the Empire, of course, but it would be my strong recommendation that you leave our waters sooner rather than later, and be... circumspect about returning.”

“Don’t have to tell us twice,” Leris muttered.

“And one other thing—thank you.” Livia smiled, and it was the most genuine expression Leris had yet seen on her face. “It’s been some time since I’ve seen a fight quite like that. For that alone, you have my blessing.”

\* \* \*

“The Empress’s blessing,” Leris mused. It was a beautiful day. The sky was overcast and the wind whipping at their sail a tad too cold for Leris’s liking, but the sun was setting at their backs, and the waters of Little Brother waited for them less than a day to the east. “Is that anything like the Empress’s Honour?”

“Get any more smug,” Gerthe said, “I’ll throw you off this boat.”

“But then who would get you home?”

Gerthe gave the sail a look like weighing her chances.

“Three times,” she said.

“What?”

“The story. You can tell it three times.”

“What story? The one about how I beat Maria Agrippa in single combat to win your freedom?”

“Two times.”

Leris laughed, wild and free, and above her seagulls responded in kind. “What’s next, d’you think?”

“Home.”

“Sure, but after that.” Leris squinted into the distance. As much as she would have liked to be back on the open ocean, it was probably best to spend the night on this side of the Ilii Straits, and was that a nice little cove in the distance?

Gerthe was thinking it through. “Reckon we’re gonna find ourselves ineligible to compete.”

Leris tilted her head. “Agrippa doesn’t strike me as the spiteful type, exactly.”

“Lawful, though. We cheated. Technically. Gives her grounds.”

Leris mulled that over. “Well,” she said eventually, “about time the archipelago got its act together, don’t y’think? Independently, I mean. Who needs all that imperial bureaucracy? Imagine—we could run all our own tournaments, all year round, not just when the imperials can be bothered to travel.”

Gerthe grunted. “Didn’t take you for the administrative type.”

“Not me personally. But something tells me Antion won’t be the most popular member of his family any time soon. You reckon he wants to be our Aedile?”

“Thought the point was *not* to involve the Empire.”

“Oh, he’s barely imperial anyway.” Then she laughed again, because the sky ahead was brightening and there was no reason not to.

Later, as they made landfall for the last time in weeks, Leris watched the sun setting over the Inland Sea. She was drawing in the sand with a stick, sketching out a new design for

the sail: a coconut crab, wrapped firmly around the trunk of a palm tree.

Gerthe settled in next to her, watching in companionable silence. “Land crab, is it?” she asked presently.

“Family’s right. I never did fit in. No sense pretending otherwise.”

“Still you, then.”

The stick paused. “Still me. Finally me.” Leris looked up, squinting into the sun. “All this time I’ve been overcompensating for traditions that never really mattered to me. The nomads, they have their views. The axe is male, the spear is female, that’s how it is. But that’s not how it is for *me*. Both are important to me. Not equally important, maybe, but important. And that’s okay.”

“Still a woman?” Gerthe said it as only a Mniboan could, utterly matter-of-fact.

“I think so. Only maybe now it doesn’t matter as much as it used to. It’s one thing about me, not *the* thing.”

“Happy for you.”

Leris found that there were tears in her eyes. The evening was turning chilly, and she pressed closer. “Thank you.” She swallowed. “And thank you for coming through for us, at the end there. I’m sorry... I’m sorry you had to be in swordform.”

Gerthe's arm found its way around Leris's shoulders. "What kind of friend would I be if I hadn't? What kind of sister?"

"Still."

"Swordform is unpleasant. Doubt it compares to what you and Ulmo went through. I should be the one apologising."

"Let's neither of us apologise, and just agree not to make a habit of it."

"Deal."

Leris stood up and took a few steps towards the sea. The water was at its most magical, the last gasp glory of the sun setting it ablaze with cold, white flame. "What do you think?" she said. "Spot of spearfishing? I could do with some fresh fish."

Gerthe shaded her eyes with one hand. "No spear."

And Leris, not so much as pausing to think about it, said, "I fancy I can do something about that."

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Edited by Scott H. Andrews

*Beneath Ceaseless Skies*

ISSN: 1946-1046

Published by Firkin Press,  
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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