



Shackled to the Orc

Author: *Corin Cain*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Captured, sold at the auction, and shackled to the brutal Orc...

Khan is the towering champion of the gladiator ring. His tattoos mark him as a fallen chieftain, reduced to fighting in the pits. Decades of battle have left their scars on his green, chiseled hide... and the pit master rewards his service with his pick of women.

He buys me.

I'm bought and chained to the beast. Khan is terrifying. A massive monster of an Orc who could hold me down with a single finger, with sharp fangs and hungry green eyes. But despite his rough exterior, I see more than just a monster in him.

The scars on his muscled physique are nothing compared to the scars on his conscience. He failed his tribe, and he views his punishment as fighting in the pits until he dies. He has never tried to escape, never dreamed of life beyond the pits.

Until the moment he saw me at the auction, when his nostrils flared and he tasted my scent. It drove him mad, his eyes rolling back with need as he turned savage with a single drive. To conquer me, and make me his.

He thinks I am his mate, and we're both trapped together. And unless I can give him something to live for, we'll die as captives.

Total Pages (Source): 46

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

1

MAYA

The fire crackles in the hearth as I run the cool, wet towel over Thomas' feverish head. Our living room doubles as a makeshift hospital, our kitchen as a pharmacy where I grind the herbs and make poultices that fill my and my mom's home with the familiar scents.

I set his leg as best as I could, giving him stillroot to help the pain. His clammy hand feels so small in mine as he squeezes weakly. "I'm here," I say, to let him know he's not alone, that I'll be watching over him until he's healthy.

I run my fingers over the deerskin pouch in my pant pocket, lingering over the soft material of what used to be a robust bundle of herbs. Now it's flat, the potent, distilled herbs down to the last crumbs. I haven't risked foraging for over two months.

"I'm going out," I say, firmly.

"No you aren't." My mom crosses her arms. She still treats me like a kid, but I've had to grow up fast in the last year. I started apprenticing for Mariel when I turned twenty, long hours soaking up her endless knowledge. There was this sense of urgency I didn't understand until Mariel was scooped up by Lord Corwin to work in his castle a year ago, leaving our village without the woman who soothed me when I had a toothache growing up, who oversaw every birth, the woman who was there no matter how big or small your ailment was.

I did my best to fill her shoes. I wish she was here now, to guide me, because I don't know if Thomas' leg will heal fully without the potent medicinal lotus found in the swamps north of the village. I could be risking my life for nothing, stalking through forests and roads thick with patrols. But if I don't, and Thomas has a limp for the rest of his life, I'll think back to this night, when I was too scared to go out into the dead of night, and I'll hate myself forever.

"Mom, I need to get the blue lotus. Now," I say, not explaining it too clearly, because ten-year-old boys are smarter than most adults give them credit for. Thomas groans, looking over at me.

"Give him another dose of stillroot in an hour. I'll be back before daylight."

My mom walks closer to me, so she can speak without being overheard. "We've already lost three villagers to his patrols. It's too dangerous. Your life is worth more than the ten silver pieces he'd get..." She trails off, not able to finish the horrible sentence, and suddenly she looks old, so old and worried, the wrinkles around her eyes more pronounced as she looks at me with fear and care.

"I have to. You know I have to," I say, and grab my muted cloak, tugging it tight over my loose-fitting tunic and trousers. It's a damn cold night.

But not too cold for Lord Corwin's opportunistic patrols.

The look in her eyes is heartbreaking, but she still gives me a huge hug. "Please, be careful," she whispers.

"I will. I always am," I answer, wishing my voice sounded more reassuring, as I pull myself from her arms and open the door to the chill of the night. The three moons are near full, casting their baleful glow over the village, huddled homes weathered and close knit, paths connecting them. Dead stalks and withered leaves litter the frost-

covered fields. Our stores should be filled with their bounty, but the blight hit, at the same time the northern herds were decimated, our hunters coming back empty-handed from hunts in the public lands.

Some take to poaching. I treated an arrow wound just a week ago, from a farmer who was nearly caught by a patrol when he tried to hunt rabbits in the Lord's private forests.

Some aren't so lucky in their escapes. You'd almost rather an arrow than what happens if they take you captive.

I pull my cloak tight, knowing it could be worse. We could be up north, by the mountains where the orcs, driven near starvation, have been raiding the poor villages incessantly. Packs of the marauding brutes have made their way all the way south to us, and it's the one small blessing of Corwin's increased patrols that they have not struck our sleepy village.

I set off north, my moccasins soft against the compacted earth, avoiding the twin wagon ruts dug into the road. I wish I could stay on the main road, but at least for now, stealth is more important, so I grimace and stride next to it in the brushy grass, keeping my eye out for Corwin's men, ready to jump into a bush at the slightest sign of movement.

I'm not yet in his private lands, but catching me would lead to interrogations about why I was leaving my village so late. I've done nothing illegal. Not yet. But all they need is suspicion, and they'll round me up and take me to Corrigan city.

It's the biggest annual slave auction of the province, and Corwin would sell my life to the highest bidder.

He uses the threat of a fate worse than death to keep us subdued. The last rebellion

was five years ago, and he paraded the survivors in chains through the villages on the way to Corrigan, where they were sold into the mines.

If I'm lucky, I'd be sold into servitude, forced to work for some rich noble family in one of the big cities.

If I'm unlucky...

I force the thought out of my mind, traveling north until the ground becomes so wet I can't walk beside the road any longer.

I pull myself up carefully, looking for any sign of soldiers on horseback, and skulk forward at a jog.

2

KHAN

My sword is poised over the warrior's heart, time freezing, every second an eternity as he stares up at me without fear. There is only hate in the orc's gaze. If he was once like me, the arena stripped away everything that made him good, turning him into a twisted brute who lives only for violence.

His chest heaves with exertion, wheezing gasps from his punctured lungs painting his fangs red as he lays bleeding against the sands. His skin is a deeper shade of green than mine, his fangs longer, his skin covered in warts and boils where mine is smooth, but we are both orcish monsters to the humans who imprison us and force us to kill or die for their amusement.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

Gullet, they call him. Undefeated. His huge, distended belly grew with each killing, devouring them before the baying crowd. If he got me on my back, he would have ripped my stomach open with his fangs and feasted on me alive.

I pant in exhaustion, but my blade stays steady as I meet his stare, and we are united, two pitfighters who but for one slip in the blood-drenched sands or an unlucky blow could have had our fates reversed.

The battle may have been a half-hour, fighting until exhaustion, but it passed in an instant. Feinting, striking, wearing down the beast, never letting him get his hands on me. Then it was done. I dug my blade into his heel, pivoting, and drove it in his lungs when he turned to face me.

Above us, the thick smog of the city is held at bay by the transparent, shimmering dome that comes out when there is a guest of honor at the games. The city of Corwinhold is a blight on nature, and in its arena, the masses pack in to watch the blood sports that distract them from their existence in the factories that supply the capital with weapons and machinery.

Now that the battle is won, I feel every wound. The dull ache of my tortured muscles, the searing fire in my arm where he landed a hard blow of his hatchet, the grinding of my right knee where I was smashed by a mace four years ago that makes each step wear my bones together. The constant headache makes my head swim, still nearly as painful as when my jaw was broken two months ago when I was put up against three half-orcs with clubs.

Around me rise the stone walls of the arena, and at the seat of honor is the snot-nosed

little lord, Corwin's heir Lucian, bug-eyed as he leans in. He has never tasted fear.

He has only meted it out.

Nineteen, and yet still a foolish boy, he raises his hand. The crowd quiets, every eye on his thumb as he raises his arm high. Lucian savors the moment, feeling as a God as he decides on mercy or cold death. My felled opponent tries to push himself up, but his ruined arm gives out, and he slumps back against the sand, mouth open and panting, his red tongue lolling out obscenely.

Lucian's thumb points downward.

I drive my blade into my foe's heart, and pull back, stepping away as the fountain of crimson blood spurts. The crowd screams with bloodlust.

It is done.

I do not raise my arms in victory. I do not bow to the little lord. I turn, limping out of the arena and into the fighters' tunnel, where I slam my blade hilt first into the weapons keeper's hands. The hallway is lit by weak, pulsing light, and as I move further into the tunnel, the familiar groans and screams of pain from the infirmary greet me. I pass by the butchery, not wanting to see if Peter is dead, catching a glance from the side of my vision of doctors and nurses in blood-stained aprons trying to repair the damage to wounded fighters as they beg for drink or stillroot to ease their pain.

My arm is throbbing, a new wound, the hatchet thunking into my bicep and nearly shearing it to the bone, but I stride past the bay without stopping as my wound closes on its own, the skin knitting together.

I do not numb my pain. It is a reminder that I am alive, while those who trusted me

are not.

I turn the corner into our waiting room, nothing but two wooden benches facing each other in front of the iron bars of the door leading to the transport hub. They keep us far apart from rival gladiators, because if we brawl when no one is watching, the wounds and bloodshed earn them nothing. The pitmaster owns our lives, and since I started fighting for him eight years ago, his home has grown, sprawling out.

Robert, the red-bearded guard who I could snap in half, holds the cuffs almost apologetically as I take my place on the wooden bench, between my fellow fighters who have left space for me. They nod to me in respect. Six of us were brought to the Corwinhold for the games, and four remain, three humans and a half-orc. Standing, the other half-orc would only be a half-foot shorter than me, but he has his head bowed over, the chains connecting the collar we both wear to his hands and feet. No one speaks. We're always silent after the fights, each recounting the battle in our minds, each step, each blow.

I am glad that Peter survived his fourth bout in the ring. He gives me a weak smile of appreciation but doesn't say a word, exhausted, his tunic wet and clinging to him from the sweat of his fights. He was nabbed for stealing two months ago and chose the pits over losing his hand. The betting odds gave him a chance in fifteen to survive his first bout. I evened those odds, getting him to trade the unwieldy sword for a dirk, and showing him where to stick it to end a life.

Robert cuffs my wrists as loosely as he can get away with, then my legs, threading the chain into them and to my neck, so I can only hobble, as per the King's decrees. Any fighter with a drop of orc's blood must be restrained during transport. The chain jerks the cuffs against my hurt arm, and I suppress a groan of pain.

It took four men to sedate me after my first battle, the bloodlust still in me. Now I sit still, waiting. There will be another battle, another enemy, another chance to fulfill

my promise to myself.

“Well? Why aren’t we going to the fucking wagon?” grumbles Garvin, cocking his head towards the iron bars that lead into the transport hub. Over half his life, he has fought in the pits. At forty-four, he is the only gladiator of the stable older than me. He was once a fierce fighter, but now he is put up against untested newcomers. It might as well be an execution. He is looking forward to his jug of mead and plate of roast chicken he gets after a fight.

Horses whinny and trot nervously as five men approach our holding cell from the transport hub. Shug, flanked by his eternal guards, men half my size with swords at their belts, one constantly holding a crossbow, cocked and ready. I watched an enraged gladiator try to get to the pitmaster, and he got a bolt through the heart. The powerful gladiator’s limbs turned to jelly as his spine was severed and he was dropped from a distance, all his strength useless, never getting within ten feet of Shug.

Shug stops six feet from the bars. He’s smart. He never gets within arm’s reach of me, not even when I’m shackled up so tight I can barely hobble. He’s seen me rip people’s arms off. Shug is short, even for a human, with a big belly, clad in a brown tunic. He doesn’t show off his wealth with baubles like the other pitmasters.

“Khan. You did well today.” His three guards spread out around him, forming a wall.

I grunt in response.

“I’ve got a prize for you.”

“No prize.” He gives the other gladiators treats for winning, as if throwing bones to a dog. Bottles of whisky and mead, prime cuts of meat, new weapons and armor to show off in the fighting arena.

I've used the same pitted steel blade for the last eight years.

“You're going to like this. You're not going back to the estate. We're going on a trip.”

My lips curl back, showing my fangs. I used to roam mountains, taking my men on hunting trips in the icy tundras, a life of fresh air and bathing in icy streams, following the herds. Since my capture, I have been nowhere but the pitmaster's estate and the fighting ring.

I swore that for my failure as chieftain my only escape would be when someone stronger, faster, better, or luckier than me ended it all. Each long year in the ring, I slow, injury upon injury racking up. I'm getting old. Most pitfighters are in their twenties. I'm not as fast as I used to be, and Gullet nearly ended me. It was his hatchet getting lodged into my arm that let me slice his leg, slowing him, and though it took another twenty minutes, it was already over. I circled him endlessly, one blow after another, until a final cut to his ankle and his last attempt to strike gave me an opening.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“I stay here.”

Shug cocks his head. One of his guards unlocks the barred door and opens it, the hinges squeaking in protest.

I stand up, and I can't suppress a groan as my knee rings out in agony, and I hobble out. There's no use fighting it. He'll take me where he wants, whether he has to beat me first or I go willingly.

I hurl myself awkwardly into the prison wagon, and the guards lock my chains to the bars as I sit on the floor, looking out at the dying evening light that filters through the smog of the city. Shug goes to the front with the driver and two of his guards, the other staying to escort the other fighters to his estate.

He looks back at me through the bars. “You want to know what you're getting?”

I ignore him, looking straight forward.

“Four, five, a dozen women, however many you want. And not just for the night. You'll have a personal harem. You've earned it, Khan.”

My mind churns. He has paraded women past my cell before, walking them naked past me. The stink of their terror revolted me. They see nothing but a brute monster when they look at me, a savage beast they fear would tear them to pieces.

When I don't answer, he yells at the driver to get us going. The horses trot out eagerly, wanting to be out of the packed hub and into the air.

I lean back against the bars, thinking already of my next fight.

3

MAYA

Iskulk forward, when the clink of metal and the sound of horses makes me dive to the side, the marshy ground under my knees as I crouch in the thick bush. Thorns prick my neck as I calm myself, getting low to the ground as the horse-drawn wagon rounds the bend.

It's not Corwin's men. It's a prison wagon, three men in the driver's bench, controlling the reins as the metal cage rattles along behind. One of them has a crossbow across his legs, gazing out for any sign of danger. There is only one man behind the bars.

No, not a man.

An orc.

His hands, legs and neck are cuffed, long chains leading to the bars. His dull, stony green skin is covered in black tattoos, the markings of the north mountain tribes inked on his brutal muscles. On his right bicep is the twisting black serpent proclaiming him as a warlord, but if he led men into battle before, now he is a captive. His skin is like jade, smooth as stone, and he looks like he was chiseled out of the granite of his mountain home.

As the moonlight washes over him, I am enthralled by his brutality, his strength, his strange almost-beauty, a body created for war. Clad in a black loincloth and sitting back against the bars, his taut body is marred by scars and old wounds. His neck is thicker than my legs, and his face is weathered, grizzled by time and stress. He must

be nearing forty, an old lion fighting each day to survive, endless battles wearing him down but never ending him. Caged, but not helpless, his form coiled power.

I know where they are taking him. At midnight, the auction opens for the long weekend.

The three men in the wagon are oblivious to me, but the orc's green eyes flicker as he turns his head, twin emeralds staring straight at my hiding spot. His nostrils flare. He's upwind of me, and I know he can taste my terror. The orc species can taste their prey.

I stare at him in horror, waiting for him to roar out that there is a skulking human, my only hope that he hates his captors and will not give me up to them, even if it would gain him a reward.

The three moons bathe his body, his eyes glowing as he stares, his short fangs glinting, then he is gone as quickly as he came, the wagon trundling along the path through my village to Corrigan.

I let out the breath I was holding in. With frayed nerves, knowing I can't go back yet imagining the warm hearth and my bed, I continue on the road for a half hour until I find the tiny little path. It winds between the long grass as I sneak into the marshes. I can still feel those burning green eyes on me.

I need them to be the only set that spots me tonight.

My moccasins squelch and crunch against the frosty marshland as I enter the woods, each step a cautious negotiation with the spongy ground as croaking frogs and chirping insects surround me, hushing at my presence.

They are my alarm system.

The bare trees are like bones around me, the mire treacherous. I know the route well, but I haven't traveled it in months. Even with the frogs croaking behind me, I sneak from shadow to shadow. A branch creaks under my foot, and I freeze, petrified, slowly pulling my foot back before it snaps. I doubt any of Corwin's men are this deep in the marshland, but his patrols must get a juicy bonus for each poacher or thief they snag in the night.

The gurgling brook tells me I am close, and I pass through the treeline into a clearing with a pond. The three moons illuminate the pond, the blue lotuses floating serenely. A year ago, the pond was covered with them, but only a few dozen remain. Corwin has been harvesting this spot of the rare plant for his medicines, taking more than the pond can sustain. Three of them are open, the white, gleaming center marking them ready for harvesting. I've always been enthralled by them, the deep blue of their petals the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I might have set Thomas' leg expertly, and he'll be able to walk again—but I can't take any chances with the boy. The ground up petals, when consumed as soon as possible after a bone break, helps the cartilage and bone restore.

I step towards the pond, when something wraps around my foot, and before I can react, I'm flipped over and pulled up towards the closest tree. The knife falls from my boot, landing on the ground as I sway in the air from a rope I would have seen if I wasn't staring at the lotuses like a fool. A bell jingles as I sway, a cacophony after my silent travel. I reach out, groaning as I try to get the knife, but it's just out of reach. I wiggle my foot, trying to get free, and grunt as I do a sit-up, my abs straining as I grab at the rope, but it's firmly around my ankle, rubbing painfully against my skin. I'm stuck tight, and all I am doing is making more noise, the bell jingling, and another one, farther away, like an echo.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

The trap is connected to a set of ropes and bells that will alert whoever set it. They must be sitting like spiders in the middle of their traps.

I fall back down with a gasp, my head hanging as I slowly sway on the rope trap.

I reach up, each movement slow and careful, and open the pocket of my pants, nearly dropping the supple deerskin pouch filled with my most valuable possessions, the herbs I use for healing. I put it into my mouth, clamping it under my tongue.

I don't know how long I'm here, my head like a balloon, and my cheeks must be turning bright red. I'm starting to get faint, beads of sweat trickling up my forehead and dripping to the ground. I'm a captive marionette to my unseen captors, if they get here before I pass out and die.

How long can a person stay upside down?

Low, deep voices. My heart pounds, my temple throbbing as blood rushes to my head. Two men, wearing the charcoal grays of Corwin's troops, step out of the treeline, their combat boots muddied, huddling in their heavy jackets with blades at their belts. One has a crossbow slung over his shoulder. They aren't high ranking enough to be given higher technology. My thoughts feel slow, panic and adrenaline swirling dizzily.

"Here, kitty kitty," laughs one of them, staring at me with beady eyes. He's pudgy, his cheeks fleshy, his uniform straining against his bulk.

"Ho ho ho! Right at the fucking finish line, we catch another. Think we can get her to

Corrigan by midnight?” This one worries me more. He’s got a compactness to him, a thick strength, and his hand is near his blade, even with me trapped. He looks left and right, searching to see if I’m alone. He’s got no helmet on, and he has strange patches of his hair missing.

“Hell, it doesn’t matter, she’ll sell tomorrow. How old do you think she is? Twenty?”

“Yeah, at most. You think she’s still a virgin?”

“These village girls have taken twenty dicks by the time they're twenty. I fucked one for a loaf of bread last week. Hey, you, you ever taken a cock before?”

I spit at him. It lands impotently in the marsh. “Pretty enough though. If there’s no rush...”

“Don’t get any ideas. The doctor checks them in Corrigan. Virgins are worth more, and we’ll get a bigger bonus. Careful with her. You bruised the last one up bad. Captain was pissed, said she wouldn’t fetch a good price.”

“Captain. Fucker doesn’t have to do patrols. We do all the work, and he gets paid. Plus, that one wasn’t my fault. She tried to bite me.”

They approach me cautiously, speaking about me like a piece of meat. The one with the patchy hair looks down, and darts forward, grabbing my knife. “Look at that. Were you going to poke us with that? Got any other blades on you?”

I twist, trying to rock the rope, dizzy, trying to grab at the sword at his belt, my vision swirling. He reaches into his pocket and brings out a grey handkerchief. He rushes forward, and his hand is on my mouth and nose, and I can’t breathe, panicking, trying to hold my breath as long as possible, but when he pulls his hand back ever so little my body can’t stop itself from breathing in a hacking breath. I smell the stink of

something sharp.

Somniferum Raptura.

I feel like I am in a dream, my mentor Mariel showing me the huge book with plant after plant in it. It smells like sharp peppermint, she said. A plant has the unique property of releasing pollens which make nearby animals...

Everything goes black.

4

MAYA

I wake up in near darkness as someone tries to force something down my throat. I slap at the hand, to a yelp of surprise as a wooden ladle clatters on the ground, water sloshing out.

“Don’t waste that!” comes an angry hiss from across the jail cell. I double over, coughing, and the pouch of herbs drops from my mouth. From some miracle, I didn’t swallow it. I tuck it into my pant pocket, looking around, trying to get my bearings.

There’s an uncomfortable feeling between my legs, and I groan, putting my hand down.

“Nothing happened to you. Yet. The doctor inspects us on arrival.”

“Inspects us?”

“General auctions for all but you and Red over there,” comes another female voice as my eyes slowly adjust to the dim light that seeps in through the prison bars. I’m in a

room with five other women, all under forty, dressed in simple clothes, with rips and stains.

Even a small criminal charge can land you in the slave auctions. The lordprotectorCorwin finds it more profitable to sell undesirables than to have mouths to feed in prison, and when the tributes from the villages are low, any slipup can land you here. With the blight, our harvest was low, the tribute pitiful, and I always suspected he uses the fear of the slave auctions to stop us from revolting.

The jail is windowless, but there's a lamp flickering somewhere in the hallway. Across from us is another cell, this one with three men, one toothless and staring at us blandly, the other two with thin blankets pulled over them and sleeping on the stone floor.

The stink of unwashed flesh and a small bucket makes my stomach roil. I yearn for the crisp, clear air of my village.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“General auctions? And what’s happening to me and...and Red?” I can guess the answer, but I hope that she knows something I don’t, that I’m wrong. The woman who first tried to give me water picks up the ladle, dipping it in a bucket and bringing it to me. I take it gratefully, sipping. She’s beautiful, with raven hair, tall and lean, with thin fingers unblemished by callouses.

“You’re a virgin. They’ll sell that off to the highest bidder, unless someone wants the package deal.” She’s blunt and honest, not sugarcoating it. I look down at my left arm, where a yellow ribbon is wrapped around me, matching the red-haired woman sitting in the corner, so pale she is like a ghost.

“No!” I say, nearly shouting, and there’s a groan from the cell across from us as one of the men shifts in his sleep. “That can’t happen. There has to be a way out,” I finish, in an urgent whisper.

“I’ve been here two weeks. You don’t think I’d have gotten out if I could? I tried everything. I tried offering one of the guards a fuck if he’d let me go for a walk. I tried pretending I was sick.” She looks disgusted, her words sour.

“The auction is tonight, isn’t it?” I say, horror growing.

She nods. “Yeah. People coming from far and wide. We’re part of the biggest celebration this shithole city has all year.”

I instantly think back to the orc in his cage. I didn’t think I could ever have something in common with those brute beasts, but we’ll both be sold off tonight to the highest bidder.

That old, grizzled warrior will probably be forced into the gladiator arenas, to fight until he's killed.

As heavy footsteps come towards us, I instinctively reach to my moccasins for my knife. It's gone.

The captive women press their backs against the wall, all except the raven-haired beauty who stares straight forward, resigned.

"You two! Backs against the wall!" the jailer barks out, pointing at me and the red-haired woman, who is already slumped against the back wall, defeated. I stand next to her as the jail door swings open. One by one, the women are led out, until it's just me and her. From across us, the other guard bangs his baton against the cell door of the men, waking them up. Subdued, they are marched away, until it's just me and her.

She sobs, softly. "This can't be happening." She moans, throwing her head back and squeezing her eyes tight.

"What did they get you for?" My ears are keen for the sounds of the jailers returning.

She pulls herself up, sighing, and walks to the barred door. She looks left and right. Even with no one near, she starts talking in a hushed tone. "That little welp, Lucian, was trampling through our fields on a hunting party, and a fucking fly flew in my mouth. I spat. He called it an act of symbolic defiance."

"Bastards. They're picking up anyone they can for the slave auction. Tributes were low this year, and Corwin wants to fill his coffers." I speak in a normal tone, and she winces. "No use whispering. What else can they do to us? I'm Maya, by the way."

"Of course tributes were low. There was a blight, and the herds were thinned out before they got here. I heard the orcs slaughtered them all for a great feast." She

shrugs. "I'm Elara."

"Is there any way we could, I don't know, use surprise to try and get away when they come to take us?"

"No way. The guys across from us, they were making noise late one night, and the three of them got beaten."

"Fuck." I reach into my pocket. I've got nothing of use. My herbs are for healing, but I wish I had some crushed-up petals of burn-flower, the anti-bacterial plant that I could throw into their eyes and blind them while we got away. I ran out of it two weeks ago, treating Finn's cuts after his axe slipped cutting wood.

I need to accept my situation. I need to think.

I take the pouch out of my pocket and put it back under my tongue.

If the raven-haired woman was right and my virginity is going to go to the highest bidder...

I don't have any guarantee I'll be keeping my clothes.

"What are you eating?" asks Elara.

"Nothing," I say, my voice sounding muffled, and I nearly choke on the smooth deerskin. Elara's too distraught to ask further questions.

I take a mental tally of my herbs. I've got a small bag of ironbloom, for sealing wounds, and if I somehow get a flu or fever, I can chew on silvershield leaves. Nothing that can help me, except maybe the stillroot, which in high enough doses could knock someone out or even put them into a coma, but I'd have to find a way to

make them drink the tea. And if one of the spiders crawling on the walls of this cell happens to be poisonous, I can make myself an antidote of veridane. That's it. I didn't even get my hands on the blue lotus plant. Other than that, the only thing I have is a few rocks of minerals, good for long journeys to put into drinking water if you sweat heavily to replenish the body's sources.

Other than that, the only possessions I have are what I'm wearing. A well-made pair of moccasins my mom made me, my earthy green tunic, and my comfortable trousers old Edmund gave me after I delivered calves for him. My cloak is gone.

The booted footsteps of guards make me grit my teeth. I knew the risk when I went out, and I think to Thomas, to my mother, who will know now that I didn't make it back. Their terror, their stress, is the mirror of mine as a new guard, tall with a shock of messy grey hair and a baton at his belt, unlocks the door and barks at us to get going.

He marches us up the hallway and through a set of doors, and I can hear the muffled noises of a crowd as we are led through a back doorway and onto the stage.

The stage is wooden, rough and well used, the amphitheater's décor a dated caricature of wealth, gold paint peeling on the walls, the seats packed with a crowd of men, leering forward hungrily, their faces blurring together. It is a gallery of ogling masks that suffocate me, most dressed in fine clothes, others in wearied garments, saving up their working lives to buy a virgin to breed and keep.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

It isn't the men that make me freeze, petrified until I am pushed forward from behind, stumbling onto the stage.

It is the women.

Nine of them, fully nude, their hands cuffed with a chain attached to the top of thin, metal poles that line the stage. Their heads are down, despondent, their bodies on display for the mass of predatory gazes, like insects crawling over our bodies, their hunger etched in their leers and whispered comments that snake through the air. A portly merchant in silk robes near the front row licks his lips as I am pushed onto the stage, whispering a comment in his compatriot's ear, to chuckles.

On the stage, in front of the nude women, is the auction master, tall, draped in opulent purple robes that billow around him. He turns to see the new arrivals, his features hardened, etched with years of calculating transactions. He has a crown of silver hair on his head, and a small smile comes to his thin lips as we enter. "And here they are, the last two pure, untouched young women for your bidding pleasure."

His guard stomps towards us, with heavy brows and a lined forehead over squinting eyes. He is squat, in dark clothes and leather armor, with a baton that bounces at his waist as he approaches us. "You can strip, or I can do it for you. Trust me, it would be my pleasure," he says, staring at me and Elara, obviously imagining what our bodies look like under our clothes.

I don't want his grubby, callused grip on me. I have no other choice. My hands shake as I reach up, undoing my tunic. I always wore loose, flowy clothing, always liking the feel of being hidden behind thick layers of fabric, and now hundreds of eyes are

staring at me, waiting for my naked body to be exposed.

Elena is frozen, shaking. “Just do what he says, it’ll be easier,” I whisper to her, and she moves into action, stripping quickly, like any hesitation would make her lose her nerve. I feel bad for her already. Her body is toned and pale, and she’s beautiful—which means she’ll be the target of these disgusting creatures in front of us. I can only hope she’ll go to a lord who is not too cruel, or a merchant baron who will feed and treat her well.

I drop my clothes on the ground, and the guard who escorted us from the cells grumbles, bending over to pick them up. If I only had my knife, I could drive it into his neck while he was distracted, but then I’d be trapped, with nowhere to run. I hold my hands over my breasts, trying to cover myself, the gazes on me so intense I can feel them, like cockroaches crawling over my body.

“Move!” barks the squat guard, and I steel myself. There are two thin, metal poles with handcuffs dangling from them in the center of the stage. I walk with Elena forward, and we both share a suffering glance, trying to give each other confidence. She is cuffed first, her hands above her head, her pale breasts on display as she struggles, and whistles and jeers fill the room. I grit my teeth, feeling the deerskin pouch under my tongue that is my last, private rebellion, and put my hands up over my head.

I try to keep my gaze forward, to avoid showing the fear that claws at my throat, but it’s no use. Scared, angry, sad, it doesn’t matter. I’m just a piece of meat to these bastards, worth a little more because of the innocence between my legs, and the moment is suffocating me, panic in a rising swell. All my knowledge, all my stories, all my friends, it’s all reduced to nothing.

I am just a prize to be won, an object to be possessed.

I start as a clock tolls. Twelve long strokes, and the auction master takes center stage, his arms wide to the crowd. “Welcome! Welcome, to the first night of the Corrigan Showcase, the biggest auction in the southern regions! Do we have anyone from the capital?”

There’s laughter and smiles, and a few whoops from the rows. There is an air of festivity, and waiters in crisp, black uniforms navigate through the crowds. The rows of seats are filled, and there is standing room at the back, where common folk are packed in, some probably just here for the view, to ogle us, enjoying the sick, powerful feeling of goggling at virgins while we cower in front of them. The waiters navigate the crowd with choreographed precision, bringing glasses of white wine to the seated buyers, while tankards of beer are sold to the masses at the back.

The guard steps towards me and pulls the chain from the other side of the metal pole, forcing my hands upwards, my breasts jiggling, and the shame infects me as the crowd stares at me, enjoying my humiliation. My cheeks flush red, and I try to calm myself, try not to show any weakness to these bastards, but I can’t stop myself.

“These eleven specimens are untouched, pure, inspected by Dr. Martin himself. Boy, I’d like to have his job, wouldn’t you?” There are more drunken laughs from the crowd, and I run my tongue against the deerskin pouch.

I hope whoever buys me puts me into the kitchen once he’s done having his fun and I’m just another woman of his estate. I’ll dump the entire stillroot into his drink, and he’ll never wake.

“You all know the deal. Bidding starts at thirty silvers for ownership—if the minimum bid isn’t reached, then they’ll be offered for the night for a trial run, and you’ll have the option to keep them or return them.”

My stomach roils. Thirty silvers. That is what my life is worth, and for my innocence,

a handful of grubby coins, before I am thrown back to the general auctions. Thirty silvers is more than a farmer can save in a decade. I'm worth more than a cow, less than a purebred horse.

"Then let us begin! First up. This one was caught trying to burgle, so keep a good eye on her, and don't spare her the whip. For anyone who can handle a wild filly, starting at thirty silvers!" He gestures towards the woman to my right. Unlike the other chained women, she has her head up, her gorgeous blonde hair down her back and her eyes full of fury.

"No takers? Bidding starts at three for the night!"

Hands are raised immediately, no one wanting her as a servant, but eager to buy her for their perverse amusements. The count goes to seven silver and three bronze pieces, a grey-haired merchant in silver robes raising his hand for the final time and smiling in triumph as she is released from the pole and dragged off the stage, disappearing as if she was never here.

"And this one, skulking around the marsh at night, trying to plunder from the lord's marshes. We identified her as a skilled healer, and once you get tired of her in bed, she can be useful in your staff."

It takes a second to realize he is talking about me. There is low chatter in the crowd, men speaking to each other, and looking at me in a new light.

Before he can even start the bidding, the corpulent merchant in the front row, clad in a striking blue surcoat that strains against his belly with puffy white sleeves, raises his hand. When his bid is taken, his pudgy fingers rest on the chair, twitching with anticipation.

More hands rise. I have to hope that they are interested in me for my skill with plant

medicine...

But they wouldn't pay a premium if that was the only thing they wanted.

The bidding is at forty pieces when no more hands rise, and the merchant leans back in his chair, a smile at his wet lips as he runs his hand through his slicked back hair.

“Going once, going twice, so—”

“Her!” the deep voice booms out, a primal roar that deafens the crowd. The mass at the back parts, fear painted on their faces as they push away from each other, parting. All eyes are to the back of the room.

It is the orc.

MAYA

He hobbles through the door, towering over every man in the amphitheater, his feet shackled together so he can barely shuffle, his hands cuffed behind his back, his biceps bulging, the veins filling as he fights against his restraints. He stomps forward on his huge, gnarled feet, his black hair heavy against his thick shoulders, his body restrained brutality, his emerald-green eyes staring at me as he licks his fangs.

The orc stomps forward, and no one stops him, the crowd shying away, all talk hushed. The thug of a guard steps in closer to the auctioneer, touching his club nervously, clearly not wanting to draw it and attract the orc's ire as he shuffles down the steps towards me, his balance perfect despite barely being able to move.

He is wearing only his black loincloth, his thick bulge pressing against it, his muscled body covered in intricate black tattoos of runes, a tapestry of ancient symbols of the mountain tribes, interwoven patterns that run over his body. On his right arm, the black serpent that marks him as a chieftain coils. With each flex of his muscles, it comes alive. The runes seem to shift and dance on his body with each movement, and he is an unstoppable force, even chained, moving towards me unerringly.

"Khan, heel!" The man I saw in the front of the wagon, wearing a brown tunic, yells out, but the orc ignores him. Guards start standing in the crowd, hands on their weapons, but none draw, none of them wanting to be the first. Even with the orc cuffed and shackled, he is well over seven feet tall, an imposing presence that unsettles the crowd, and his fangs gleam, ready to bite into anyone who gets in his

way.

And he wants me.

The brutal orc warrior wants to own me. I was wrong. He wasn't here at the slave auctions to be sold.

He's being given a prize by his master, probably for cutting down a hundred enemies in the arenas. He's in his late thirties, a grizzled beast worn down by endless fights, the white lines of old scars marring the black runes of his tattoos, but his head is still high, a pride in him that cannot be beaten down. He exudes power and fierce, primal strength.

"I bid on her!" yells the pitmaster, and it is the only thing that stops the orc in his tracks. He shakes his head, seeming to come to his senses, but his nostrils flare as he sniffs in, trying to pick my scent out of the crowd.

"She's mine! I won her!" The merchant in his blue robes shouts, his jowls jiggling indignantly.

"The bidding is still open," says the auctioneer in a quick tone, taking advantage of the commotion to look for another deal. "The bid is at forty-one silvers."

The pitmaster grits his teeth in annoyance but raises his hand.

Instantly, the merchant raises his. The orc growls, baring his fangs, and steps forward.

"Fifty!" yells the pitmaster, trying to stop the commotion by any means necessary.

The merchant looks me up and down, licking his lips, fixated on my naked body. Then he shakes his head, disgusted. "Is this how you run your action?" He grumbles,

and I can only hear his low tone because the entire crowd is dead silent, nervous energy filling the masses, all the waiters standing still, everyone trying to make themselves look small.

“Going once, going twice, sold, to the great pitmaster Shug!”

Shug speaks in a low tone to the orc, and the orc tears his gaze from me, pulling himself back up the stairs, slowly, and I can see the limp from an old wound in his right leg. His left arm has a newer cut underneath it, and his wrists are bleeding, blood dripping down his restraints where he fought against them so hard they cut into them. He was put into a rage when he saw me, losing all thought in his brutal need to have me.

The guard clips my handcuffs from the pole. “I’m not going near that fucking orc, you walk up,” he says to me in a low voice, without the confidence he had when he was threatening to rip my clothes off.

I walk off the stage, barefoot, and keep my head up. I’m terrified, but I get this strange satisfaction as people look away from me, no one ogling me, all too scared of the orc to even glance at me.

I look back over my shoulder, at Elena, and our eyes meet each other. She looks terrified, filled with pity for me, but I give her a nod, trying to tell her soundlessly that I am going to be okay...

But I can see in her eyes that she is glad it was me chosen by the monster, and not her.

The orc has left the amphitheater through the doors, and the pitmaster is looking down at me, his expression blank. “You. What is your name?”

“Maya.”

“You just cost me a pretty penny, Maya. That’s my best fighter. You do whatever he wants, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I say, my head down.

He grunts sourly. “Get in line.”

I look up, confused, into the hallway behind the slave auctions. The orc is in the lead, then a guard with a crossbow and another, red-bearded guard with a blade at his belt, followed by three women. They are all staring straight at the ground, terrified, their hands cuffed, simple brown robes covering them.

There’s no robe for me. They were only planning to buy three women...

The orc turns. He looks my naked body up and down, his emerald eyes burning with hunger, and his loincloth twitches, his bulge growing, that massive thing of his coming alive as he breathes in, his nostrils flaring. Terror grips me, and he blinks, turning away from me. He is so big the hallway feels small, and people are keeping their distance, backs pressed against the wall, waiting for him to move along.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

It takes me a second to realize what all the women have in common.

They are all broad shouldered and taller than me, the shortest maybe 5'9 or 5'10, all healthy, with callused hands that speak of lives of farm work.

These are not women for this pitmaster's harem, and they would be out of place working in his home.

The slavemaster brought them for breeding with his prize fighter.

And the orc picked me out, personally.

My breath catches as the waves of horror come over me. With the fat merchant, I might have had a chance to escape.

When that orc gets his hands on me...

I won't survive a night.

6

MAYA

We trudge out into the wagon hub, horses whinnying in fear as they smell the orc, shying away as their owners cast foul glances at us. The cold night wind makes goosebumps rise on my skin, and I cast an envious glance at the rough cloaks wrapped loosely over the other three women. The horses of the prison wagon are

used to orc's smell and stand and wait as the red-bearded guard unlocks the back and swings open the barred doors.

The orc grunts in pain, awkwardly turning and scooting himself into the wagon while shackled, refusing all help. The red-bearded guard attaches the collar of the orc's neck to the back prison bars, getting within a foot of the fanged mouth with no apparent fear, then shackles his right hand to the back before the pitmaster steps forward and gives him a hushed command.

He leaves the orc's left hand free, the chain dangling from his cuff.

"You. In here," says the red-bearded guard, but his order has an edge of respect, his gaze flickering to the orc then to me. I was chosen by the fighter, and the guard doesn't want to insult me in front of him.

I steel myself and take the red-bearded guard's hand as he helps me into the back of the wagon. It's empty, except for the orc, the thick bars surrounding me. I bite my lip, standing far away from the intimidating beast. Even sitting, he's massive, this wall of stony jade-green flesh covered in runes of power and violence. He's chained to the back bars, but his muscles are so huge it seems like he could flex and break free and be on me in a second.

The guard shakes his head. "There," he says, pointing right next to the orc. The orc's legs are outstretched, covered in tattoos and scars that form a tapestry over his tree-trunk-wide limbs.

The pitmaster is watching me carefully, judging me, and I need him to see that I'm just an obedient little slave. I gather up my courage and sit down next to the huge orc, and to my horror, the guard cuffs my right wrist to the orc's. I feel so tiny next to him, my skin touching his, sending frissons of nervous energy through me. A raw, primal scent emanates from the orc beside me, an earthy fusion of musk and the

untamed wild. It's thick in my nostrils, beastly and masculine, and it smells strangely right, almost comforting, because he is so alive.

I shiver, naked as the wind blows through the wagon hub, making my nipples harden, my skin goosebump, and my teeth chatter as the other three women are brought in. Their handcuffs are removed, and they sit across from us, as far away from the orc as possible, all while staring straight at the ground, wanting to be invisible. One casts a terrified glance upwards, but when her eyes find mine, there's the tiniest flash of relief, and I know what she is thinking.

That at least she isn't shackled to this brute.

We take off, the raucous sound of drunken crowds becoming distant as we pass the stone walls and onto the road. The orc's skin against mine is smoother than I expected. He's warm, and I'm grateful for that tiny bit of his body heat that presses against me. Clad only in his black loincloth, the cold doesn't seem to affect him at all.

The horses carry us up the road, going north towards Corwinhold, and I know with a sickening feeling that we will pass through my village, and that I will see it for what might be the last time. I should be home by now. I hope that my mother doesn't see me like this, that she is safe at home by the fire, praying for my return.

The wind whips at me, and I shiver uncontrollably as the women across from me pull their heavy cloaks around their bodies.

"She is freezing. Give her a blanket!" barks out the orc. The pitmaster looks back, calculating, watching us carefully, then bends down and grabs a thick blanket, which he passes through the bars. One of the women grabs it, and she bites her lip, nervous, terrified to get any closer to the orc. She kicks it over, and the orc leans forward, reaching out, so that our hands move together as he grabs the blanket and awkwardly helps put it over me. It is rough wool and smells of horseflesh, but I am grateful for it.

I watch him out of the side of my eye, trying to get a read on him, but it's impossible. He is so huge, so beastly, his profile etched and worn. I feel like I am chained to a mountain. He's older than me, almost twice my age, a grizzled fighter who has lived in the ring since I was a teenager with my head full of foolish thoughts.

I wiggle under the blanket, and I pull it around me, cognizant that his hand is inches from my naked flesh, that he could reach out and touch me, run his huge green fingers up my thigh, grope my body, anything he wanted, and I would be helpless to resist.

The wagon trundles along, chains rattling. I'm scared of him, but there's a spark of hope, this whisper of the thought that maybe, just maybe, he's not as brutal as he looks, that the power of his that made those disgusting buyers of human flesh avert their gaze from me could somehow turn into my freedom, if we could work together.

His nostrils flare, breathing in my scent, and he turns his head, staring at me. Fangs gleaming in the moonlight, his broad face so hard and strong a man would break his hand trying to punch him, I'm cowed. I can only hope he is not from the blood-crazed tribes that steal humans for meat. His emerald eyes burn with hunger, and as he licks his lips, my heart pounds in panic as his loincloth moves, his cock thickening and pulsing as he tastes my being, and I know that this man will not be my protector.

It's true what the rumors say of the brute species. They can smell innocence. They raid villages, taking war-brides to their mountain homes, turning them into their slaves. I'm going to be trapped with this beast, until I give him what the pitmaster wants.

An heir. Along with these other three women, used to sate the beast's endless lusts.

Panic, pure, animal panic fills me, and I try to pull away from him, to shift as far away as possible as I can while keeping my hand next to his, scared of angering him

yet needing to be away from him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

With a grunt, he shifts away from me and looks away.

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, when we turn a bend and I see the smoke curling from houses of my village. A knot of emotions tightens in my chest. The village is a well-worn storybook of memories, a beacon of safety, familiar warmth that feels like it is a thousand miles away even as the wagon goes up the main street. I grew up here, lived my life, learned in the little schoolhouse with twenty other children. I can hear the gurgle of the stream where I learned to swim, my mom always warning me not to go after a rainfall. The huge oak tree where I had my first kiss, with Mathew, the little boy with clever brown eyes who became a blacksmith and moved to Corwinhold for work.

A scream pierces the silent night. My best friend, Zephyr, in her night robe, runs after the wagon, but the driver whips the horses onward. I can't look back. I want to, to get one last glance of my home, but I know it is fading away behind us, and it's too painful. My eyes get wet, tears filling them, spilling out and dripping down my cheeks.

The orc slowly, gently, raises his left arm, my right going up with it, so I can grab the blanket and wipe my eyes.

"Thank you," I say, my voice strained, frayed by grief.

"Your village." It is a statement, his voice low and rumbling, and I wonder how long it has been since he saw his northern mountain home.

"Yes." I take in a deep, racking breath, and dry my eyes, lowering my hand with his.

There's this gnawing at my heart. Even if by some miracle I escape, I can never come back.

I am nothing but a slave now. Property. The pitmaster Shug knows where I came from. I can never go home, or I would be snatched up, and anyone who shielded me would be sold into slavery, guilty of theft.

When they catch you after the first escape attempt, they brand you, so that there is nowhere you can hide, so that anyone who sees you can turn you in for a bounty. I would be hunted for the rest of my life.

The orc raises his arm, and looks over at me, and gently pats my knee, then brings his hand back down between us.

The rhythmic clop of horses' hooves and the wheels against the packed earth is all we hear as we are taken north, no one talking, the aura of fear and uncertainty gripping us all, until I smell the chemical stink of Corwinhold. The huge, grey walls rise up in front of us, and thick smoke billows, the city alive even in the dead of night, working around the clock to provide for the king. Some villagers go to the city to work for yearlong contracts, coming back worn down, usually with a persistent, dry cough. I boil mullen-weed and have them lean over it with a towel over their head, and it gives them relief, but most will have the cough for life.

Some come home missing fingers, hands, or toes. It's better pay than working on a farm, but there's a cost to it.

There is a crossroads ahead, and instead of going towards the walls of the city, the driver turns right, the horses already turning without being told. His home must be out of the city. The wealthy live on the outskirts, where the air is fresher. We travel past the city, and huge homes spread out, many with vineries and fields of crops. The clang of metal on metal slowly fades as the homes get bigger, the estates more

sprawling, the road thinning. We turn onto a winding path, and the pitmaster's home comes into view. Tall walls surround it, and two guards open the massive iron gates to let us in.

On a hill, there is a mansion, with towering pillars, overlooking a lowered training ground with dummies and sand. Gigantic columns rise like sentinels, and there are guards peering out watchfully from the second story of his home, crossbows in their hands. Everything looks eerie in the light of the moons, bathed unnaturally, the shadows long and spreading out in different directions.

We stop by the training pit. It is a huge, sunken arena, with weathered walls. Four guards, one carrying a flickering torch, greet us. The pitmaster stays seated, watching us as the guards open the back of the prison wagon. Thankfully, they undo my cuffs, and I rub my wrist, stepping onto solid ground, covering myself as best I can with the horse blanket. They undo the orc from the bars, but cuff him again behind his back. They know how dangerous he is.

"All of you. Go with Khan," says the pitmaster, motioning to the three terrified women.

"No. Just her," growls the orc. Khan. That is what the pitmaster called him, when he tried to get him to heel in the auction. It is a cruel name, a name for a leader, a mockery of him.

"I spent a pretty fucking penny for that last-minute pick. You caused a real scene, Khan."

"I did not pick these three. I do not want them."

The pitmaster gets a foul look in his eyes. Khan's arms are cuffed behind his back, but the guards still reach for their swords, wary around the beast, as if he could

explode at any moment into awe-inspiring violence. There's this dynamic between them that is different than slaver and master, not exactly respect, something I can't place.

Shug looks at me, then the three women, shivering despite their cloaks, and I want to yell at him to get them inside while he debates their fate. I'd get the whip for defiance. In my village, people listen to me when I speak. They didn't, a year ago, but now they come to me at their lowest points, and they rely on me to get them better.

Here, I'm nothing but a piece of meat, whose purpose is to shut up, do what I'm told...

And obey the pitmaster's prizefighter.

"They are strong. Kitchen work. Gardening. Make use of them."

"Fine. Don't let her wear you out too much, Khan. You've got a fight in three days."

Khan starts walking without a word. Where I wouldn't have dared make a suggestion, he told the pitmaster what to do...

And Shug acquiesced.

I follow along, treading carefully, bare feet on the packed earth, avoiding pebbles as I jog to keep up with his long strides towards the training arena. Squat buildings are connected by stone hallways, the gladiators kept in a contained, functional area that contrasts against the grand, inviting mansion, which has huge balconies overlooking the training pit itself so that Shug can watch from the comfort of his home. There is an archway, worn with time, with two huge wooden doors, barred from the outside. The red-bearded guard grunts, lifting the wooden bar, and opens the doors.

We walk into the cool, stone building. There is another set of metal doors. Shug doesn't take any chances with his gladiators. He respects their power. Behind us, the door is closed with a heavy thud and the bar is put back in place as the red-bearded guard takes a set of keys out and opens the internal metal door. Khan walks through, cocking his head at me to follow.

Then the metal doors are closed, and he stands next to the bars, his hands behind his back, as the red-bearded guard unlocks them in practiced movements, lifting the shackles, and carries them back to the door, where he knocks. Before it is opened, a sliding panel is pulled open in the door, so that the guard outside can look in and make sure the gladiators are firmly trapped behind the metal door. The entire area is locked down, the gladiator section a series of squat buildings that surround the training area.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I have the feeling that if they looked in and saw the orc holding a knife to the guard's throat, they would let him die rather than let the orc go free.

I hold the horse blanket firmly around me. "Come," says Khan.

"Where to?"

"To my quarters."

I gulp and follow behind him. We pass by an open door where stone floors stretch beneath rows of wooden bunks, the stink of unwashed flesh and beer assailing my nostrils, lanterns hanging as men stay up late, playing cards and drinking, until one catches a glimpse of the orc.

"He's back!" The game is paused, and two men get up, striding to the door as the orc stops. The rest continue as they were, but I can see the respect in their eyes, the twenty or so men nodding or lifting glasses. Most are human, but I catch sight of three half-orcs, huge, big brutes of men who would look like giants if it wasn't for Khan.

Of the two humans who approached, one is in his forties, a scar running down his cheek, with short, thinning hair and an unkempt beard. The other is young, thin, and grinning from ear to ear, his cheeks flushed from drink.

"I didn't think I'd be alive right now, Khan, I didn't think I'd fucking be alive right now," he says, wonder in his eyes, and starts laughing. To my shock, he starts to do a jig, until the older man pushes him.

“Go get another drink, Peter, you’re way behind.”

“On it, boss!” he says, and stumbles off, dancing his way to a huge wooden keg.

“Just one lass for you, Khan? Bastard Shug, said he’d buy you a dozen.” He looks me up and down and drinks from his tankard. The other men looked at the orc with a mixture of respect and fear, but this grizzled old warrior looks comfortable. He’s probably been in this compound for decades, and stopping an orc warrior in the stone hallway is as comfortable for him as me getting a cup of tea in my kitchen.

“You got taste though. Looks like a healthy young lass.”

“Tell the men that any disrespect to her is a disrespect to me.” Khan growls it out, and the old fighter raises his hands apologetically.

“Hey, hey, don’t get angry there, big guy, I’m just saying she looks healthy. Want me to send over some fresh clothes? They won’t fit for shit, but it’s better than a horse blanket.”

Khan nods. “Leave them outside my door.”

The old warrior turns to the bunks. “Hey! Peter, get some fresh linens over to Khan’s, leave it by the door. You two greens, boil some water for his bath!”

Khan strides down the stone hallway, and I follow, until we get to another set of wooden doors. He opens it and ushers me in.

“You get your own place, huh?” I say, trying to make conversation, anything to release the tension of the moment as I find myself in the room, alone with the orc gladiator. He strides in, his limp more prominent, groaning as he sits down on the wide, low cot against the stone wall. It creaks under his heavy bulk. At the base is a

fur blanket, neatly folded. The huge tub, big enough to fit his over seven-foot-tall bulk, is against the wall, and I look at it with yearning. Baths are my weekly luxury back in my village, and I love nothing more than sinking beneath the warm waters with fragrant herbs and mineral rocks from the mountains that soothe my body and soul.

There is a small window, with bars, looking out at the mansion. The room is spartan, with a small wooden table and a huge, sturdy wooden chair, all lit up by a single oil lantern hanging from the ceiling and casting a soft glow that dances over the walls and over the orc's huge body as he sits on the bed, his head down, black, tangled hair falling over his broad features. There is a hearth, with a few logs in it, and I shiver, wishing there was a roaring fire. Next to it is a wooden chest, and on it is the first hint of his presence, a rune carved into the top.

There is a small door that is open ever so slightly, leading to a bathroom and to a sink that to my surprise has faucets and must have running water.

The neatness to it, that surprises me, from the clear table to the folded fur blanket. A small bedside table has nothing on it except a jug of water. The smell of him permeates the room, musky and masculine, and I'm intimidated by how he dominates the room, this huge, wounded beast of a man, worn down by decades of fighting, yet still alive and vital.

My mouth goes dry when I realize there is only one bed. Unless I want to sleep on the cold stone floor, I'm going to have to curl up with him.

"Sit, if you want," he grunts out, when he sees me standing awkwardly. I pull out the chair, turning it so my back is to the wall, and pull myself up. My legs dangle. It is made for his over seven-foot-tall bulk.

He leans back, opens the bedside table, and takes out a flint. Khan pushes himself up,

moving heavily, and squats by the fire, his huge thighs flexing as he strikes the flint and blows, and in less than a minute, the logs have caught, the warm, hot light dancing over his muscled body.

Then he stands, towering to his full height, nearly touching the ceiling, this monstrous, imposing presence that dominates the room. The firelight illuminates the contours of his rugged features, his strong brow, his wide, thick jaw, the twin emeralds of his eyes that glow, as his nostrils flare and he tastes my scent. He steps in closer to me, and I push back against the chair, staring up at the mountain of his being, his chiseled abs, the broad pectorals, his huge trap muscles and neck thicker than my legs.

One finger and he could hold me down. He's so tall, that when I sit, I'm nearly eye level with his huge bulge, and I can smell this deep, thick musk, and I shiver, but it makes a frisson rush up and down my spine, my senses overwhelmed by the monstrous creature. His cock thickens, his bulge growing, pressing against his black loincloth, and he reaches out, his thick, callused finger stroking my cheek. I am frozen, petrified in fear, as I stare up at his emerald eyes, feeling his rough touch as he traces my face.

"Why...why did you pick me?" I gasp, but I already know the answer. It is written in his hungry eyes, his obvious lust, his ravenous hunger that will ruin me.

His finger traces to my lip, and my heart pounds as he slides it past them, forcing his fingers into my mouth as I sit, frozen and terrified.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I stare up, wide eyed, gagging as he presses his huge fingers into my mouth. He slips his meaty digits under my tongue, finding my deerskin pouch, and pulls it out, holding it up accusingly.

“What is this?”

“How did you know?”

His eyes flash. “Answer me.” His voice is hard, not used to being disobeyed.

“Herbs. That’s all. I’m a healer.” I look down. “I was a healer.”

“In show matches. Fighters keep pouches of pig blood in their mouths, to make the crowd think it is real. You learn to see these things.” His voice is deep and growly, a harsh accent in his tones. He speaks to me in longer sentences than he does to other people, handing my prized possession back to me.

“Your leg is giving you pain. I have stillroot. I can make you a tea, it’ll soothe you. It’ll taste like I ruined a good cup by steeping it until it’s so bitter you’ll want to spit it out, but it’ll help.”

With a long groan, he sits heavily back on his bed, and I let out a breath. Being a foot away from the orc makes me feel this intense pressure, like he could snap at any moment, those fangs resting against my neck, his huge, red tongue sliding over my skin as he tastes me.

I pull the rough, woolen blanket over me tighter as the fire heats the room, finally

warming me. There's a cautious knock at the door.

"It's Peter. I've got the clothes and some food, and hot water's on the way."

Khan plants his hands, but I get up quickly, throwing the pouch under the bed where it will be hidden. "I'll get it," I say, opening the door.

Peter looks younger than me. He's a thin, wiry fellow, his cheeks flushed red, and he's got a canvas sack and a huge plate laden with slow-cooked meat, parsnips, and a huge piece of crusty bread.

"Milady," he says, bowing his head to me, and I take the sack first, thanking him and putting it by the bed, then grab the heavy plate of food and put it on the table as footsteps come down the hallway. The smell of it is filling the room, making my stomach rumble.

Two men, humans, near Peter's age but both broader, one bald with uneven stubble, the other with a clean-shaved face missing most of his teeth, lug a huge cauldron, their muscles straining. They are wearing matching, ill-fitting vestments, covering their torso and upper legs, like a one-piece tunic.

"May we enter?" the one missing teeth asks, his arms shaking with the weight, looking up nervously at the orc. He nods, and they walk in, pouring the boiling water into the bath. They lug it back out, and two more men, these ones older, nearing thirty, repeat it, each holding a large wooden bucket which steam rises from.

It takes a dozen trips, while the orc sits in wait, before the huge bathtub is filled. I keep looking longingly at the food, but I don't dare bite into it.

"Eat," he says simply, and pulls himself from the bed. I grab a chunk of crusty bread eagerly, dipping it into the juices of the meat, and take a bite, which I choke and

cough on as he pulls his loincloth off with a practiced movement, tossing it in a basket by the door.

His cock hangs like a massive green snake, the head enormous and a deeper shade, nearly purple, with thick black hair above it. His balls are bigger than apples, huge and pumping him full of more testosterone than a dozen human men. His dick swings as he steps to the tub, walking past me, and I can't help but stare at his powerful, muscled ass, every inch of his body designed for fighting...

And something else, which makes feverish lust rush through my body.

He sinks into the tub slowly, the water near boiling, and lets out a long groan. I manage to swallow the big bite of bread, but I can't take another, trying not to look at his naked, muscled body as he leans back in the huge tub.

"I've got..." I clear my throat. "I've got some little mineral rocks, they are good for sore muscles," I say, trying to be useful.

He turns his head, his gorgeous green eyes contrasting against his hard, intimidating features, and gives me a near imperceptible nod. I retrieve my pouch from under the bed, pull out two small rocks, and put it back into my hiding place.

I brace myself, awkwardly balancing the blanket over my body, and approach him in the tub. I drop the two little rocks into the steaming waters, and they dissolve as I go back to my seat by the table. He brings his hand up to his temples, pressing against his forehead, grimacing.

"What is it?" I ask.

He pulls his hand down. "Nothing. Headaches."

“For how long?”

He shrugs. “Two months.”

“Two months? Do you drink enough water? It could be dehydration,” I say, and get up, grabbing the pitcher by his bed and pouring it into the glass.

“It’s not dehydration,” he says, but he still downs the huge glass in a single gulp.

“Then what is it?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Got my jaw broken two months ago. Strong fighters.”

“That wound under your left arm. It’s still new, within the last week. I’ve got something to stop infections, even if you won’t take stillroot.”

“From today. I heal fine on my own.”

I grit my teeth. I’m used to men trying to refuse medical treatment.

One farmer left a cut so long he nearly lost his hand, the stubborn old bastard.

“Peter brought clothes.” I grind my teeth in annoyance, but open the bag and take out a vestment, just like the ones the gladiators were wearing. There are two of them, in different sizes, and I grab the one that might just fit the best. As well, there are a couple pairs of well-worn sandals and some socks.

I take it and walk to the small door, aware of his eyes on me as I go into the bathroom. There is a toilet with a wooden cover, a sink with faucets, a window which gives fresh air and a large wooden bowl of crushed mistwood, which kills bacteria and smells, next to sponges. The orc is exceptionally clean. Next to the sink is a bowl of freshmint. I wash my hands, then grab a piece, chewing on it, freshening my breath, and drop the huge horse blanket. It’s been a long day, and I yearn for a hot bath, but there’s no way I am going to be naked in front of him.

I saw how his cock throbs for me. I know why I was bought. But I’ll delay it as long as I can. I pull on the strange clothes, made for a man, too big for me, a rough tunic that grates against my skin. It hangs off my body loosely, but I always liked loose

clothes.

I hold my hand over the doorknob, hesitant. Through that door is my new reality. I draw myself up and open it, stepping through.

He is running his right hand through his hair, putting in soap, while his left, injured arm hangs loosely over the edge. The cut under it is a murderous red, but he's right—it does seem to be healing well. I can't believe he got it today. I heard that orcs were quick healing, but it takes seeing it to believe it. If he was a human with that wound, I would have expected it to be at least three, four days old.

“Throw the blanket outside. It stinks,” he says, his hands stroking through his thick hair. No please, no thank you, just do what I say.

I take the blanket from where I dropped it and put it in the hallway outside, looking out longingly, knowing that there's nowhere to run.

And back I go, into the orc barbarian's home. He finishes washing his hair, and grimaces, his lips curling back and showing his twin sharp fangs as he grinds his teeth, in obvious pain.

I push down my fear. If I am going to have any chance of getting out of a lifetime of slavery and ever seeing my village again, even for a moment, my only chance is with the orc as my ally.

“If you won't take stillroot, at least let me relieve your headache with my hands.” His black brows furrow as he looks at me with irritation.

“Your voice...” He winces, even speaking hurting his head. “It's too loud.”

I roll my eyes in frustration. This brute is infuriating. “I'm serious,” I whisper. “I can

help. Let me.”

“I believe you.”

“So what, you like feeling shitty?”

“I accept it.”

“Well, I don’t.” I try to imagine that he’s nothing more than another unruly patient.

I walk up behind him, and my hands shake as I bring them up to his neck. He remains still, his shoulders the only thing above the steaming water, so broad he fills the massive tub. I bite my lip and put my hands on his neck, gently, feeling for knots.

The whole damn thing is one big knot!

He’s holding more tension than anyone I’ve ever felt. I slowly slide my hands up towards his jaw, and when he doesn’t protest, I find his masticators, and press in, gentle circles that can reduce tension and aid in blood flow. I stare straight forward, not wanting to accidentally look down and see his over seven-foot-tall, muscle-bound, very naked body.

He groans, in deep satisfaction, sinking deeper below the water as my touch soothes him. I slowly move down his jaw, to his neck, working at the knots, then knead his shoulders, applying deep pressure that makes him sigh.

See? What did I tell you?

I look down at him, in triumph, and it’s a huge mistake. Oh fuck, but he’s attractive, in this overpowering way.

He is this jade behemoth, carved from rock, curly black hair thick against his huge slabs of muscle, scars crisscrossing their way down his tattooed length. The runes are intricate and detailed, each one a work of art, but they only seem to enhance his power. He's got more abs than I thought possible, his shoulders broad and tapered down to his powerful waist, and I can't help but keep glancing downwards, until I start to get distracted, finding it difficult to focus on the movement of my fingers as I see that huge thing between his legs, floating upwards in the water. I hope it's a trick of the light and the refraction of the water, because flaccid, it looks about as long as my forearm.

And the pitmaster bought me to breed with him.

My eyes widen as I imagine the stretching, brutal pain as he would press that enormous thing into me, losing himself in his lusts, brutally ruining me for any other man, and a frisson of the darkest, shameful lust rushes through me. His nostrils flare as he lays back, and his cock stirs, throbbing, slowly growing with each beat of his heart, and I remember with humiliation the rumors that orcs can taste your emotions, that unless you control yourself, they know exactly what you're thinking.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

The shock of it growing in response to my need fills me with shame, overpowering my lust, and I clear my throat, staring only at his neck as I work my hands into the knots. A few minutes later, when I sneak another peek, to my relief, his cock has softened again.

I use my fist, grinding my knuckle into a stubborn knot, slowly releasing his tension, then move my hands up his broad jaw and to his temples, pressing in above his eyes. He stays completely still, trusting me. I wonder how long it has been since anyone else has touched him without violence. “Is that better?”

He doesn’t answer for a second. Then his eyes flash open, and I see something I wasn’t expecting, this quick surge of guilt. “Yes.” He sits up and pulls himself out of the tub, grabbing a thick towel from underneath where there is a pile folded neatly by the claw feet, and dries himself as I look away. He undoes the stopper at the bottom of the tub, and the warm water drains out in a torrent through a tube leading into the ground.

Then he hangs the towel on the back of the door and opens the trunk by the fire, taking out a pair of light white, flowy pants that he must sleep in, pulling them on, and I wish they were darker, because they don’t leave much to the imagination. I feel like an intruder in his world as he grabs the biggest fur blanket from the bed, putting it on the smooth, clean stone floor, the only speck of dirt a horsehair from the blanket that was wrapped around me.

“You will sleep in the bed,” he orders.

I should say yes. It’s a relief, because there was this relentless tension, waiting for the

moment when he would tell me to get naked in his bed and spread my legs.

I cross my arms. “You’re not sleeping on the floor. You’ve got a bad knee, a cut arm, and you’re bruised all over.”

He snorts. “I’ve slept on worse.”

I get it. You’re the big, bad orc warrior. Only, you’re not invincible.

“Well, I’m not going to sleep in the bed if you’re on the floor.” I raise my eyebrows at him. “I’m sure there’s got to be another bed in this compound. Must be gladiators coming and going, right?”

He lunges. In a blur, he lifts me in the air as if I am nothing, my world spinning. I scream in shock, and he carries me to the bed, pushing me down. I struggle, but he effortlessly holds me down with one hand, tucking me into the tight white sheet with the other. He keeps his grip on my shoulder, holding me in place, his face so close to mine I can feel his hot breath against my face. His gaze pierces through me, twin emeralds that seem to stare straight through my soul. I am affected to the core. His sheer power, his deep, musky scent, his rugged features that make my skin prickle with an intoxicating mixture of fear and anticipation. My breath comes ragged, but he stands up, giving me a hard look that tells me not to try and leave the bed. Then he goes to the table, wolfs down the food faster than I can believe is possible, and goes into the bathroom, all while I sit, frozen, processing what just happened.

I force down the annoying feelings of heat, that dark tendril of craving, focusing on my anger. What kind of way is that to end an argument? Instead of coming up with a reason I can’t just take another bed, far away from this boorish brute, he throws me into bed?

A minute later, he comes out and blows the lamp out, the only light from the dying

fire and the moonlight seeping through the window. With a grunt, he lowers his huge form to the ground on the fur blanket which will serve as his thin bed. Even in the flickering light, his eyes gleam. I glare at him, hoping his night vision is good enough he can see how pissed I am.

I'm in a bed so big you could fit four of me easily, and I grab one of the huge pillows and throw it at him, not because I care if he gets a damn headache with his head on the stone, but because it feels like a tiny victory after he made me take the bed. He catches it easily, shaking his head with annoyance before resting back against it. He grabs one of the oversized towels from under the clawfoot tub, pulling it over his body, and closes his eyes.

Bastard.

How the hell can he just lie down and sleep? When he just threw me around like a doll, throwing me into bed and ignoring my screams? My cheeks flush red with impotent fury, and I grab the blankets tight.

To my shock, within minutes, the room echoes with his booming exhalations as he snores louder than the sawmill east of the town. Then his breathing stops for long moments, until he makes a choked sound, and starts snoring again.

"Hey," I whisper, and his eyes slowly blink awake. He's a light sleeper, just as I thought. "Your broken jaw. It's obstructing your breathing. Put another pillow behind your head to elevate it. You'll sleep better." I grab a second pillow and toss it to him, half expecting him to throw it back.

He simply watches me, not speaking, for seconds that feel like eternity. "And here I thought you were mad at me." There's this gleam in his eye that tells me he is toying with me, and I grit my teeth, remembering how easily he flung me into the bed.

“You sound like a wild boar digesting a boulder. I just want to sleep,” I grumble, and for a second, I think he smiles, before positioning the pillow behind his head and closing his eyes once again. Within a minute, his breathing has slowed, regular and even.

It’s only then that the homesickness hits me. My mom will have heard the news. My best friend Zephyr will be with her, comforting her. They’ll be in the living room—no, they’d want to be strong in front of Thomas. They will be in the bedroom, holding each other, and she’ll be blaming herself for not convincing me to stay home.

It was my own fault, but I would do it again in a second. The only thing I would change is not being blinded by the beauty of those floating blue lotuses in the moonlight, ensnaring my vision and leading me straight into the trap.

I look over at the primal, fiercely handsome orc, and I feel both drawn and repelled by him, terrified by what he is capable of, yet knowing that the only way out...

Is to harness his might.

Why did he choose me?

And if I drive him so mad...

Why does he resist his primal urges?

8

KHAN

My eyes blink open before the sun has risen, as they always do, but this time everything is different.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I don't have the grogginess I've grappled with for the last two months, and the scent of her permeates the room, this feminine, natural fragrance that made my mind swirl when I first tasted just a hint of it as my prison wagon carted past her hiding spot. It's good to smell her while she is still asleep, without the tints of grief and panic that prickle my nose.

My knee is throbbing from the stone that served as my bed, and I pull myself up silently, suppressing the groan of pain as cartilage grates. I'm getting soft. I've slept in far worse, grottos that barely stop the piercing north winds, pitching shelters in the divots of tree trunks and lying on frosty ground. I look over at Maya. The sheets are tangled around her, one of her feet outstretched, her toes looking so tiny and vulnerable. So small, so soft, yet with such strength, and such knowledge.

Last night...last night was strange. It was the first time I felt something normal in eight years, the first time I let my guard down, speaking, acting like the old me, before I failed the men who depended on me.

Before I led them to their deaths, and my own, promised in the ring.

My lips draw back as I remember the biting winds, the blizzard that my men followed me into blindly, the endless stretch of frozen days. I should have stood and fought. He would have had a chance. Brond, sixteen, on his first hunting trip, who looked up to me, who had begged to come. I should have told him no.

The rage fills me, the hatred of myself. They should have lived. I could have charged the king's soldiers, distracted them, while the dozen of my hunting party escaped. I could have rallied my troops to a defense and fought them back. I could have done a

thousand different things, and each night, I revisit that time, thinking of everything else I could have done...

But not last night. Last night, I slept peacefully, the scent of her in my nostrils, calming me. What did she put in my bath? Some sedative? Some calming agent? She said it was just minerals, but I should not trust her. I know nothing about her.

I move silently, as though I am stalking a deer, undressing, taking a fresh loincloth from the chest and wrapping it around me. It offers the most freedom of movement. Then I slip out, closing the door softly behind me, and walk down the hallway, past Garvin's private room, past the two half-orcs' domains, and to the general dormitories, which serves as a drinking hall and feasting room, as well as gambling and bartering. Human gladiators are allowed out in the city on rare occasions, but any with a drop of orc-blood is only allowed in during fight days.

I enter the dormitory and take a glance over at the two newcomers, in the bunks next to the latrine. One of them has taken his share of fists or boots to the head, missing teeth, while the other is beefy and thick for a human. Thick is good. You don't get armor as a newcomer to the ring, but a layer of fat can glance a blow. They were picked up at the early auctions, bartered for the price of cows, and few newcomers make it through their first fights.

"You! You!" I roar, and fighters groan, hungover from the festivities, clutching their ringing heads, but they know I am not talking to them, because they were woken up this way, some a year ago, some five.

The two newcomers drank their share last night. It's a way to numb the fear. "Out of bed! Attention!"

The one with the stubbly beard trips over his thin bedsheet, and falls, but jumps up nimbly, standing as tall as he can. He is in a sleeping tunic, buttoned poorly, but the

other fell asleep in his vestment. They are pale faced, men of about twenty, and they chose the pits over execution or maiming.

They'll get both, if they show up in this condition.

"Training grounds. Now."

They freeze up. Peter is getting out of bed, his cheeks sallow and sweaty from the drink. "You heard Khan! Get your sorry asses into the ring!" A few months ago, it was Peter being dragged out of bed before dawn, and I trained him until his muscles were jelly, until he collapsed in exhaustion, then I put my foot on his throat, and I told him if he didn't get up I would crush his windpipe.

He got up. He continued training, barely able to move his arms, and though he lost his first fight against the 3-1 upcoming human branded as Trooper, a deserter from the army who chose the pits over death, he put up a strong enough resistance that the crowd cheered for him, prompting his life to be spared for another bout.

They hesitate for a moment, then the quicker of the two, missing teeth, makes a beeline for the door, the other tripping up behind him, averting his gaze from me.

I killed men like him. Men who had no chance. When a pitmaster has a promising prizefighter like me, you go up against green fighters with no record, their lives worth nothing more than a digit in your scorecard. My first fight, I knocked down three humans half my size, slaying two, the third begging for his life. I knew what I had to do. I waited, until the VIP of the night, the arena master, lowered his thumb.

It was an act of mercy. Shug told me before the fight to end them quickly. If a gladiator refuses the coup de gras, you both get punished, and no one escapes that single digit pointing downward with their life. My blade is a faster end than being thrown to hungry dogs, the braying crowd betting on how long they last.

“You fighting next bout?” I ask Peter.

He nods. “Yep. Against a green. Some brawler who accidentally killed someone important in a street fight.” He goes to the latrine, washing his face in the sink.

“Don’t underestimate him. Men like that have been fighting since they could form a fist.”

“I won’t. I won’t showboat. I’ll end him quick as I can.”

“Good.” I leave the dormitories, and Peter runs to catch up. I told him that he could rest today, but he’s eager to continue his training, no longer the greenest gladiator in the stable.

I open the door to the training armory. There is light, leather armor, poorly maintained, and there wasn’t much to maintain in the first place. “Who are the greens up against?”

Peter looks away. “Both of them, up against Grommash.”

I scowl. I took Grommash’s eye, and it only made him meaner. I should have driven my blade deeper and into his brain. He has no honor, no mercy. He’s made a trademark for himself not just as a skilled fighter, but also for his coup de gras.

He swings his axe in wide circles, then drives it directly in the middle of his fallen foe’s chest.

Only the first time, he misses on purpose, letting his blade slam into the sand or take chunks off his victim’s side. He savors their fear, and if they are lucky, his second strike is true.

“A real butcher. Spears,” I order.

“Spears?”

I point to two practice spears, the longest we have, unwieldy things, and Peter grabs them, along with the long, wooden replica of a dirk. He’s slight, but he’s quick, and if it wasn’t for me, he would have tried to fight with a sword. I taught him to stalk. To dance around your opponent, to wait patiently, to ignore the jeers of the crowd calling you a coward, to wait for your moment. They don’t like the fighting style at first, but when you draw blood, they scream for you. He won them over. I watched the fight from the entrance, staring out through the bars, as Trooper broke two of Peter’s ribs with a horrible crunch, but Peter let the blow carry him, not resisting, rolling and getting back up to his feet.

I take a wooden axe, the closest I can find to Grommash’s chosen weapon. The balance is all wrong on it, too light at the end where it should be weighed down by the metal blades, but it’s the best we can do.

Shug is smart.

He doesn’t let us have real weapons, not even dulled metal ones. The training ground is sunken in the earth, surrounded by tall walls. Some of the half-orcs could climb them, but they couldn’t avoid the crossbow bolts of the ever-watchful guards if they tried to escape. A human once tried it. Shug let him bleed out from the bolt wound, his guards swearing that they would turn anyone who tried to help him into a pincushion. We listened to him die for seven long hours.

No one tried to escape since.

I'm limping more than usual, my knee protesting, but my headache has lessened. I stride out through the corridors to the training ring. In the center, the two criminals are standing, the stench of their fear on my nostrils. They are not gladiators. Not yet. The sun is rising, painting the horizon in reds and oranges.

Peter stands beside me. I grab one of the spears and toss it into the air. It lands in the sand, sticking up next to them. They both flinch. I take the next and throw it, and the man missing teeth manages to catch it, his grip around it firm.

"You are Tooth. You are Bald. Until you survive your bout, you do not get your real names."

I heave my sword into the air. It twirls, flying upwards with my full strength, and their eyes go upwards.

I charge. My knee shrieks in protest, my entire leg on fire, as I lower my left shoulder and plow into Bald, the crunch of his jaw loud in my ears as he flies back. Tooth nearly gets his spear forward enough to poke it into me before I am on him, and I lift him by his throat, throwing him into the sand.

The two men are dazed, and Bald reaches up to his mouth, spitting out blood and a fragment of a tooth.

"You're going to have to call them both Tooth," quips Peter. His entire left side of his body was yellow when I was done with him, but he had longer to train before his first fight. These two, I have to go easier on. They're nothing but meat. Nothing but statistics, two men who will never make it past their first fight.

But I will give them a chance. It is more than they would get from anyone else.

"Get up!" I bark out, and the two of them slowly stand, using their spears to prop

themselves up, the butts digging into the sand. I point to their spears. “Your opponent will underestimate you. He will charge. When he is close, you will dig the butts of your spears into the sand. You will brace. And you will let him skewer himself.”

I limp, moving heavily back to the marks in the sand where I pushed off. The wound under my left arm is an extra little sting of fresh pain and added annoyance. The two men are shaking. Bald’s lip is already swelling up, blood dripping from his mouth, but in their fear there is the stink of something new.

Hatred and anger.

I charge. The two spears snap against my body, and I push them aside, but this time lighter, just enough to knock them back, but not to pancake them against the sand. They are panting, white-knuckled, holding the wooden fragments of the spears.

“Get two more,” I order Peter. He turns and saunters back to the barracks. He’s getting cocky after winning his last three fights.

“Don’t waste your time with these two. They’re meat. They’re going up against Grommash,” says Garvin from the seats at the entrance. He’s chewing on a piece of bread, sipping a cup of the poison he calls coffee, which is half filled with whisky. Most of the other gladiators are sleeping off the night of festivities, but he’s never needed much rest to stay sharp.

The stink of their fear intensifies. “Grom...Grommash?” says Bald, his eyes wide in horror. He probably watched the half-orc fight more than a few times from the stands. He never thought it would be him inside. He probably screamed out in bloodlust at the brutal coup de gras.

“You. Tooth. You will be on the left. Grommash is missing his right eye.”

“Because you took it out with your sword,” laughs Garvin. “That one holds a grudge. He likes to make mincemeat of anyone in our stable.”

I ignore Garvin, addressing Tooth. “You’re faster. Grommash will favor his left side, turning too far. His right side is the one to strike.”

“They’re a lost cause.”

The hatred intensifies in their scents, but it is no longer directed at me, unless they are so dull and dumb they think I am putting them through this for nothing. It’s a weak tendril in their scent, overpowered by their raw fear, black despair rotting them from the inside.

When I’m done with them, they’ll be too tired to feel anything.

9

MAYA

The morning light streaming through the window wakes me, and I stretch out in the too-huge bed, yawning. I’ve woken up in the same bed since my childhood, and it’s surreal to be here, surrounded by cold stone, in a gladiator’s home.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

The only trace of him is the crumpled fur on the ground, out of place in the neat, spartan room. I pick it up, wondering what dark furred animal it is made of, and make the bed with it, because that was my routine every morning in my home. Here, instead of the sound of the wind through the leaves and the stream flowing, there are grunts and yells, wooden thuds of practice weapons slamming against each other.

I trail my hand over the cold stone walls. How long has the orc lived here? Years? A decade? The serpent tattoo wrapped around his arm marks him as a chief, a warlord of the brutal north tribes. How could that pitmaster keep him here? The orcs of the north would rather die than fight as puppets.

I pull the heavy door open. The horseblanket is gone, and there is a pair of sandals waiting, too big for me, but better than nothing. I slip my feet into them and they slap against the stone ground as I move towards the sounds. If I have any hope of escaping this place, I have to understand why the orc warlord has not. I've seen how fast he moves, how powerful he is. Walls and guards couldn't stop him, unless I am missing crucial pieces of information.

Whatever I'm missing, it's in that thick skull of his.

I go down the hallway, following the sounds of violence, down a corridor that opens into the light.

There are rows of seats, exposed to the elements, but they stop short of the wall behind us. The old, grizzled gladiator who spoke with Khan last night is leaning back in a chair, his feet up, a big mug of coffee in his hand. A couple of the other seats have men in them, resting. The training ground itself is sunken, with walls ringing it,

and I look up. The pitmaster is on a wide balcony attached to his manor, leaning against the railing while a servant brings him a tall glass of an orange drink, watching his property as they train in the morning sun. He's speaking with a tall, thin man in a tailored white shirt, not old, not young, dressed impeccably yet without any gaudy jewelry or sign of wealth, except that his cloak is affixed by a purple brooch at his neck.

In the pit is violence.

It is a cool, fresh morning, with a chill breeze as the gladiators sweat and train. The two half-orcs, each at least 6'5 and probably weighing over three hundred pounds each, are wrestling each other, their pale green muscles flexed as they fight for the upper hand, their bare feet digging into the sands. Humans are paired off, wooden swords slamming against each other and welting their flesh as they pivot.

Khan limps his way up the line of training men, barking out orders, telling men to get their arms up, stopping them after a swing to demonstrate parries with his own wooden sword.

The two gladiators who brought the cauldron of water to Khan's room last night are standing at the far end of the arena, clutching long wooden spears that they plant in the ground, as a row of ten men in light leather armor holding a myriad of different wooden weapons take turns charging them, trying to dodge their spears and land blows.

The two men are sweat-soaked in the cold winter sun. They didn't even have a chance to put on armor before being dragged out into the arena, and the bald one with the stubbly beard is wearing his nightrobe, poorly buttoned up, sticking to his skin, darkened by sweat. His movements are slow as he huffs, his chest heaving as a gladiator charges, dodging his spear, and slams him in the back of his leg with his wooden practice blade, to a sickening snap of wood on flesh. The two men have red

marks over their legs and arms from blows.

The gladiator who charged laughs, walking back slowly to the line, fully rested while the trainees are worn down. I'm hypnotized by it. Endless charges, the two men holding on by a thread, no longer trying to hit the aggressors with their spears but only use them to ward away the constant attacks.

Khan's nose twitches as he demonstrates a strike on a human fighting with a short club and a small round shield, and he turns his head, tracking me. He can pick my scent out from thirty feet away. He looks so enormous compared to the humans, standing far taller than even the half-orcs, this giant behemoth of a warrior looming over men whose lives revolve around violence, who listen to his every word.

Khan is a prisoner, but one who even the pitmaster dares not anger. He is the apex gladiator, who all the others see as their leader.

Even without his tribe, he is still a chieftain. It is inherent to him, and I don't know if it is some conquering force of will, or a duty in his being.

He looks away from me, limping to the half-orcs. One of them has the other in a chokehold, his bicep flexing around his neck, until his opponent taps out. Khan talks to them in a low voice, then takes the position of the orc who submitted, letting the other put his arm around his neck. He struggles, twisting, and his head slides out with a rotation, slamming his elbow into the other warrior's chest.

I step up into the stands by the entrance to the gladiators' quarters and sit down next to the grizzled old gladiator who spoke to Khan the night before. He's got greasy, stringy hair, a red nose from long decades of drinking, and leathery, tanned skin from long days in the sun.

"You aren't training with the others?"

He gives me a wry smile. His teeth are surprisingly white. "I know everything there is to know about fighting already," he says, and takes a gulp of his black brew. I can smell the whisky in it.

"Don't listen to that old blowhard. He's not a fighter, he's an executioner," says a young gladiator with a buzzed head, leaning against the stairs and drinking water before going back to the training grounds.

The old gladiator snorts. "No respect. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Maya."

"I'm Garvin." He extends his hand, which I shake, his grip firm and strong. "You want to know anything about anything, come to me."

"What did that guy mean, that you're not a fighter?"

"I did my share of fighting. Lived in the pits since sixteen years old. Fought for Shug's father, now I fight for Shug. I earned my retirement." He puts a finger on his right nostril, blowing out snot from the other. "They used to call me the adder. Real quick, I was."

"And who's that guy up there, with Shug?" I look upwards towards the estate that rises up on the hill above the arena, a palatial white home that sprawls out. Shug is in deep conversation with the fashionable other man.

"Another pitmaster. Alf. His daddy produces most of the olive oil in the south. Gives his son whatever he wants. But the lad's got a knack for it. A true promoter. He's put together some big fights."

"What's he doing with Shug?"

“There’s some fights in two days, they’re adjusting the card. See, most bouts are bullshit. Tanner there, the young lad with no respect, called me an executioner. He’s right.” Garvin turns his head, his dark brown eyes searching my reaction. “I go up against tax cheats, blasphemers, people who insult the king, may he reign for eternity.” He laughs, sourly. “You get a choice. Death penalty or the ring. They take their chance, men who have never held a weapon in their life, and they go up against someone like me.”

He pulls out a bronze coin, dancing it over his left knuckles as he stares forward at the fighters. “Most fights are stats padding. It brings drama. People turn up for a fight between two 40-0 undefeated champions, and they bet more, too. Alf up there just bought Grommash, a half-orc, and those two poor souls are going up against him,” he says, cocking his head towards the two men who can barely hold their spears up, their arms shaking as they face down the endless line of gladiators charging them.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Grommash is a real bastard. Only one loss, to Khan. Good fight. Khan took out his eye, and it only made him meaner.”

There’s a grunt of pain as one of the charging gladiators knocks down the trainee with the broken teeth, who slowly picks himself up, just in time for the next attack. They have no respite. It’s like a sick, twisted sports drill, only the men clutching spears won’t just get a goal scored against them.

They’ll lose their lives.

I shiver, not from the cold, but from the image of them butchered on the ground. “Do you know who he’s fighting?” I don’t have to name who.

“Yeah. Big draw. Thrukarr, a big fat fuck of an orc they captured in the Kabi desert. Don’t look so worried. Your boyfriend will make mincemeat of him.” Garvin pulls a flask from his coat, the coin disappearing, and pours more brown foul-smelling liquid into his coffee. It must be mostly whisky by now.

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

One of Garvin’s grey eyebrows rises. “Oh? Then what do you get up to all night? Discuss philosophy?” His eyes narrow. “What I don’t understand is why he turns down his prizes, tells Shug to take the other women to work the kitchen, yet he tells you to bunk with him. Now you’re a fine-looking young lady, but what’s so special about you? He’s been given women before. Never touched them.”

“Gladiators, break for lunch!” Khan booms out the order to stop, clapping his huge

hands together. Weapons are lowered, gladiators put their hands behind their heads and breathe, and the two trainees with spears collapse to the ground, panting as they lay on the sands.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Khan roars it out, limping to the two men lying on the ground. They look up, wide eyed. “I said gladiators. You think you’re gladiators? When you haven’t tasted the ring, you take that honor? Get up!”

They pull themselves up, legs shaking. “Spears over your heads.” Khan growls it out, in his deep, demanding voice, knowing he will be obeyed. With great exertion, the two men lift the wooden-tipped spears over their heads. Sweaty gladiators in light leather armor chuckle at the scene as they file out of the training arena towards the mess hall for lunch. As they pass me, they nod, some touching their foreheads in a respectful greeting.

“For how long?” The bald one’s voice is weak, his neck vein throbbing as he fights to keep the spear in the air.

“Until I tell you to stop. Whichever of you drops the spear first, the other spends the night sleeping out here,” states Khan, and the two men exchange looks, fighting to keep the weapons over their heads. While neither of them wants to be the one to sleep in the cold sands, they must fear that Khan has another, worse punishment in store for disobeying his order.

Khan strides towards the exit, but his right leg is dragging in the sand, leaving uneven tracks. His left arm is hanging, the flesh under his bicep inflamed and swollen. When he was demonstrating techniques, it was like he was another person, no hint of his injuries, but the mask slips off after combat. He’s been worn down by years of injuries that he does not treat, and though Garvin is confident, he won’t be fighting a human that he towers over in two days.

He'll be up against another of his kind.

Khan doesn't even look at me, stomping down the hallway towards the mess hall.

The only two people left are the two trainees struggling in the center of the arena. I'm not squeamish about blood or injuries. That wore off fast during my year as an apprentice healer. This...this is different, the way Khan hulks around the arena, directing the choreography of violence, and every red welt on the two trainees is part of his symphony. They're terrified, arms shaking like leaves, desperately trying to hold their spears over their heads with weakened muscles.

"You aren't going for lunch?" I say to Garvin, the only other person who hasn't left. If he's bothered by the abuse of the two men, he doesn't show it.

"I've got my lunch right here," he says, patting his metal flask. "The food here's shit anyways. I'll go to the city tonight, get some grub from the street market. You got a sweet tooth, Maya? I can get you some candy."

"They let you leave?" I ignore his offer, because I can't tell if it's earnest or condescending.

"Yeah, I earned that privilege. Never wanted to escape. What else could I do, after all these years? Couple of the other old hands get weekends free, too. 'Course, never the orcs. King's decree. You got a drop of orc blood, the only way you're leaving these walls is shackled."

"Is Khan really going to make one of them sleep out here? It'll be below freezing."

"Yep. Only, well, you'll see."

"What?"

He smiles at me. “Go get some food. Khan always eats alone in his room, give him some company. Hey! You! Keep that fucking spear over your head!” Garvin yells in a raspy voice as the bald man nearly drops his weapon, and he recovers, his entire body trembling, sweat dripping down his red forehead. Bruises are swelling over his thighs.

It’s some sick hazing ritual. Newcomers to the arena get a violent welcome before they earn the right to be called gladiators, and it’s disgusting. They have to fight in two days, and they’re going to be so worn down and injured they will be helpless against the half-orc.

I can’t just stand by and let it happen.

Useless pain is the thing I hate most. I stalk through the corridor and turn to Khan’s room, throwing open the door. The gladiators might be intimidated by him, but he’s about to get an earful.

10

MAYA

He’s leaned over the table, a huge wooden bowl of roasted meats, steamed carrots and turnips over a bed of brown rice in front of him. There’s a smaller bowl across from him, and a new chair, sized for a human, has been brought to the room. Thick, crusty bread is slathered in butter, fresh out of the oven, and my stomach grumbles. I barely touched my food last night, and I’m starving.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“How can you sit here and eat while those two are suffering? You’re sadistic.”

“Sit.”

I cross my arms, standing at the doorway, brimming with anger at him. His thick, black brows rise, and I remember last night what happened when I tried to refuse his order. I’ve got no desire to be manhandled and forced into the chair. It’s infuriating, but I’ve got no choice but to sit down across from him.

“Well? Are you going to answer me?”

“Eat.”

I push the bowl away from me, and his hand moves quicker than I can believe, wrapping around my wrist. His huge green fingers encircle me like a handcuff while he casually rips off a piece of warm, crusty bread, the butter melting on it, and dips it in the gravy. He stares straight into my eyes as he brings it to my mouth. I turn my head away, fighting to get my hand free, but I can’t move it an inch. He’s impossibly huge and strong, and he presses the bread against my lips, smearing butter and sauce. I try to push back against the chair, but his grip tightens, and he presses the bread harder against my mouth.

Each second is more humiliating, my cheeks flushing red, and I know this is only ending one way. Without a shred of dignity, I let my lips part, then chew on the soft, crusty bread. It’s delicious, flavors dancing on my tongue, and enjoying it only makes it worse.

I want to spit the mouthful at him, but the hard look in his eyes stops me. He's leaning over the table, worn down, in pain, and any shred of resistance could make him snap.

I swallow.

"Good." He releases my hand. My heart is pounding, and I want to snatch my hand back, but I slowly bring it back to me, trying to keep calm. I pick up the wooden fork and begrudgingly load it up with another bite, before he gets the idea to feed me by hand again.

"I have two days to turn those men from petty criminals into fighters."

"And turning them against each other will help them? The one who has to sleep in the freezing cold is going to hate the other."

"Both of them will sleep outside. The one who failed will not let his brother suffer the punishment alone. You will see. In just one day, these strangers will become comrades. Tomorrow, their training will be light, and they will recuperate. And in two days, they will die. But I will give them the only chance they have to survive. Just as I gave Peter that chance."

He takes another bite of meat, then puts his fork down, swallowing, while I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. "You think my methods cruel. You are a woman from peacetime, Maya. A healer. I know the business of death."

"If you know so much, then why are you still here? How long have you been fighting in the pits? Ten years? That tattoo on your arm. The ridge adder. You were a chieftain. And you let them call you Khan, mocking you, making you fight like a puppet."

He does not speak for long moments, but his expression darkens, and I regret my outburst. I know he can smell my fear.

“Do you know how one becomes chieftain?” His emerald eyes burn, bright and alive against his jade skin.

I shake my head.

“Every warrior gets a vote. But it is the Gods that choose. You spend a night alone in the pit, with the ridge adders. They wake at night. They crawl over you. One movement, one tremor, and they strike.” He cocks his head to the side. “I was chosen by the Gods. But the Gods chose wrong. I only led men of my tribe to death. The arena is my pit now. And one day, the Gods will see their mistake, and they will let the adders bite.”

He lead his tribe to death.

I understand it all now. His captivity is his own choice, his refusal of treatment for his wounds a penance.

I’m not going to be able to convince him to help me escape for his own freedom. I need another angle.

Men of his tribe.

Are there others? If every member of his tribe was slaughtered, nothing I can say will matter.

He grabs the table, using it to help him stand, then lifts the bowl, downing the contents into his mouth and swallowing. With a belch, he puts the wooden bowl down. It clatters against the table, and he limps to the door.

“Wait,” I say, my mind racing. “What about the rest of your tribe?”

“They have a new chieftain now. One who can protect them better than I did.”

“You don’t know what’s going on out there. You’re in a bubble here.”

“The outside world is not my concern.”

“The elk herds are gone, Khan. Your people rely on them. This winter, they’re not going to have any meat. I don’t know what you blame yourself for, but you’re a leader. Whatever is left of your tribe, they are going to starve, if you don’t get free.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

He growls, a deep, rumbling sound that makes me feel like a prey animal. He covers the length of the room in two long strides, grabs me by the collar, and lifts me out of my chair.

I'm trapped, staring up at the monstrous brute as he towers over me. His face is an inch from mine, his fangs gleaming, his breath hot against me. "You will not speak of my tribe again. Understand?"

I swallow. Hard. There's electric energy between us, and instead of only feeling terror, there's something else, this frisson that rushes down my spine as he manhandles me so easily, the sheer power of the beast overpowering me. His deep, masculine musk is in my nostrils, his eyes seeming to glow like gems as he fixes me with his full attention. "I understand," I say, and he releases his grip. I breathe out, shook, smoothing my vestment slowly against my body. My skin is hyper-sensitive, the rough material grating against me.

He steps back, and my eyes dart down past his muscled chest, past his lines of abs and power, where his huge cock is stirring under his black loincloth, this massive thing that throbs when he has his hands on me, our bodies reacting to each other in a way neither of us can control.

With a snarl, he stomps to the hallway, slamming the door behind him.

I'm terrified of the orc. His sheer size, his strength, the anger and violence ready to explode at any second...

But there's another image, stuck in my mind, that I can't get out.

If instead of letting me go, he threw me into the bed, his huge bulk pressing me down. A single hand holding me down easily while the other rips my clothes off, exposing my tight, hard nipples, his nostrils flaring as he tastes the scent of my lust that would boil up in me no matter how hard I tried to fight it. How helpless I would be as he gives in to his beastly rage and lust, all of it focused on me as I stare up into his burning green eyes, unable to do anything to stop him from claiming my innocence as his own.

My nipples harden, and feverish lusts fills me, all my hate and anger replaced by something else, something I've never felt before, and my pussy tingles between my legs. I'm uncomfortably wet as I rush to the bathroom, turning the cold water tap and splashing my face as I get a hold over myself.

When I stormed into the room, I'd planned to yell at him, to convince him to go easy on the two poor recruits. Now I see it's no sadistic hazing. He's got a plan for the two newcomers, using his limited time to mold them into gladiators with a fighting chance of surviving their first bout, no matter how hopeless Garvin thinks it is. I bet he said the same of Peter, and I can remember the look in his eyes last night, drunk as he danced a jig, the gloriousness of being alive overflowing from him.

Still, no matter why he's doing it, I can't watch. Seeing those two men covered in bruises and welts holding the spears in shaking arms is sickening. I sit down at the table, and eat slowly, as I think of my future.

I've got no chance of getting out of here alone. Unless I can convince Khan, I'll be trapped here, in this room, for the rest of my life. I force myself to chew, to swallow, to take another bite, my hand steady as I force down the tremors. All I want to do is lie in bed and sob, but that won't help anything.

When I am done eating, I place my fork neatly next to the empty bowl and start my daily stretches. I need to keep with the routines I've developed to help with anxiety.

But as I'm doing bodyweight squats, instead of relief, it's like the stone walls are closing in on me, the light that streams in from outside a mockery, the ashes in the fire growing larger and larger in my vision as intense pressure forms in my head.

I take a huge breath in, hold it, and exhale, centering myself, when a scream of pain makes me jolt upright.

It came from the training grounds.

11

MAYA

I take off at a run, all my tension relieved by action, rushing through the corridor and into the training grounds. The gladiators have stopped fighting, all ringing a fallen figure. Through the gaps of muscles and armor, I see a burly man lying back, clutching at his throat. Blood is dripping down the wooden spear driven straight up through his jaw, going out through his cheek. Another gladiator crouches, about to pull the spear out.

"Don't touch that!" I yell, sprinting as fast as I can, my feet pounding in the sand. "Move back," I say, and to my surprise, the gladiators step back, giving me room around the wounded man. The blood is streaming from his jaw, but not in the pulsing, pumping spurts of a cut artery. I crouch next to him, pressing my hand against the base of the wound, putting pressure that makes him groan, raising his arm to push my hand away, and Khan squats, his hands on his shoulders and keeping him down. The wounded man's eyes are opened wide in panic. He tries to speak, and blood drips from his cheek, and he coughs. I glance to his lips. No blood coming out with his breath. The spear missed his lungs. It looks bad, but as long as no one does anything stupid, he'll make it.

“You. Fresh, clean towels. You, boil water. Don’t rush it. Full boil and bring it to me. You, tweezer, needle, thread,” I say, directing my words at three different men standing and watching, making sure to make eye contact with each of them as I speak. In an emergency, everyone thinks you’re talking to someone else if you aren’t careful.

Khan is impassive, his face clear of any emotion as he holds the moaning man down, unaffected by the blood dripping on his huge hands.

“What’s his name?”

“Brenn,” states Khan.

“Brenn, you’re going to be fine. The spear missed the artery. You’re going to be okay.” My voice is like a stranger to me. I always use the same tone to speak to wounded people, the one Mariel taught me. It’s the same voice you use on a skittish horse.

Men become like animals when they panic. I look up, to the balcony of the estate, where Shug is watching with obvious interest. “Hey! Shug, get us a doctor!” I yell.

If he hears me, he doesn’t show it, just leaning out on the balcony and looking down at us like we are ants.

“No doctors allowed in. We have to carry him out,” states Khan. He is calm and measured, no words wasted.

I suppress a hiss of frustration. “You two. Half-orcs. Get the fur blanket from Khan’s bed, ropes, and the two biggest spears you can find.”

They don’t move, looking at each other first, then at Khan. “Go,” says the orc, and

they sprint away. They weren't willing to go into his room without permission, not even to save the life of a wounded man.

We do not speak, the wounded man gasping, Khan impassive, me holding my hands against where the spear drove into him. Even a blunted spear can drive through soft skin and flesh. Brenn is looking up at me, fear in his eyes, pleading soundlessly for me to save his life as his blood drips out on my hands. I look back at the entrance. The first men are coming back, holding the things I need, one with a kettle that is still steaming.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I pour the boiling water on a cloth and clean up the edges of the wound, as the half-orcs return.

“Khan. I need you to break the spear off at the bottom. As close to the wound as you can get.” I’m going to need to pull it up from the spiked tip, which is pointing out of Brenn’s cheek.

“Orin. Sylas. Keep him still,” orders Khan, and the half-orcs drop the spears and blanket, crouching down and holding Brenn’s legs and shoulders against the sand.

“Don’t touch it, it hurts,” says Brenn, his voice so garbled I can barely understand him. Khan grabs the spear, and in a quick movement, he snaps it like a twig. Brenn moans in pain, fighting against the half-orcs, who hold him down as he flails.

I search for Garvin in the crowd. He’s standing nonchalantly. “Garvin. Your strongest booze. Now.”

“I ain’t wasting my—” Khan gives him a look, and with a grumble, he reaches into his pant pocket for a second flask, this one big and leathery. He cracks it open, takes a big swig, his face screwing up with the burn as he hands it to me. It assaults my nostrils, so strong it must be near pure alcohol, exactly what I need. I pour it on two strips of cloth as Garvin winces at the waste, thinking better of saying anything.

I check the wounds again, the familiar panic rising in me, the fear that I don’t know what I’m doing, that he will bleed out, and that it will be my fault.

I force it down.

Blood drips, but it's not the steady, pumping gush of a deep hit. I grab the top of the spear as his eyes roll back in pain, and I pull upwards, until I've removed it. Instantly, blood gushes from the two open holes, and I press the cloth onto the holes. I take the tweezers and pull splinters out that will fester, and when I am satisfied, I wrap it, until the bottom half of his face is swaddled in white cloth, which slowly turns red. I exhale. The wound in his cheek is the bloodiest, but that, I can handle myself. The one under his jaw that grazes his throat, I'll have to trust to Shug's doctors.

Hand steady, I sanitize the needle and stitch his cheek closed as he groans in pain. "That's some professional needlework," says Garvin, looking down. He leans in and snatches the flask back, weighing it in his hand morosely. "Don't worry, Brenn, you'll be back for the next fight. You owe me some top-quality moonshine, by the way."

Brenn looks over at him, pissed. "Don't say anything, Brenn, just rest," I tell him, giving Garvin my most venomous look. He just grins, swaying a little, the stiff drink getting to him.

"Stay still," I say to Brenn. "It's over now. All done." I look at the half-orcs, who take their hands off him, as he lays back, silent, staring upwards.

Using the spears, rope, and the big fur blanket, I get to work on a makeshift stretcher. "You don't have a stretcher or anything? What do you normally do?"

"Not many accidents with blunt weapons," states Khan, picking up what I am doing and getting to work on the other side, lashing the fur tightly against the spears.

"Just broken noses, and I'm an expert at getting those back in place. Had my own nose broken three times, and I'm still a handsome bastard," laughs Garvin, running his finger over his nose, which I have to admit, as much as it annoys me, is straight.

“Good to have you here,” grunts one of the half-orcs, looking down at me with respect. Where before, the gladiators treated me politely because they were terrified of what Khan would do if they didn’t, now they are looking at me in a new way. I can remember the same thing happening in my village, when the older men and women who remembered me as a kid saw me at work.

I hold Brenn’s head in place as Khan and one of the half-orcs lifts him onto the stretcher, then Orin and Syllas walk him away. I resist the urge to tell them to walk slowly. Their steps are certain, and he barely jostles.

When it’s done, only then do I let myself feel the full range of fear and stress, and my hand trembles, dropping the needle. Khan takes my shaking hand in his huge grip, gently stroking my skin, saying nothing as he helps me stand.

The two half-orcs, Orin and Syllas, return. “Guards bringing him to the med bay.”

“The doctor’s a fucking drunk,” says Garvin. “And I’m the bloody expert on that.”

“He’ll be alright. The biggest risk was taking the spear out.”

“You heard her. He’s alright. Back to work,” says Khan, and the gladiators pick up their weapons like nothing happened, going back into their pairs to train.

Orin walks to me, and Khan moves himself between us, almost as if by accident. “What?” Khan asks.

“The boss wants to see her. After dinner.”

“What about?”

Orin shrugs.

“Pair up with Syllas, I want you to be able to get out of a chokehold even when the world’s going dark. Train it.”

He nods his head, and Khan takes me by the shoulder, marching me out of the arena, limping heavily.

“I can walk by myself,” I say, and he releases my arm, striding next to me until we’re back in his room. I sit down in the chair, before he can order me to. He stands, leaning his weight against the doorframe.

“Why would Shug want to see you?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“How should I know? You’re the reason I’m here, not him. You think he would have paid for me if it wasn’t for you barging down the stairs?”

His bright green eyes watch me carefully. I can’t ever get a read on him. He closes the door and sinks heavily onto the bed. It creaks under his bulk as he leans back, his huge muscles cording as he puts his hand behind his head. There’s this constant tension to him, this coiled energy that could explode into violence at any second.

“You will tell me every word he says.”

I run my hand over my forehead, feeling the tension between my eyes. “What do you think he wants from me, Khan? Why do you think he bought three Amazons with broad shoulders? You think it was to keep you company? Put it together, Khan, you’re getting old. He’s thinking about the future. He wants seven-foot-tall half-orcs to sell off to other pitmasters and raise up as the next generation.”

“I would not have a child raised into this life,” he growls, his huge hands clenching the sheets.

“I get what Shug wants. What I don’t understand is you. What do you want from me? To order me around? To make me sleep in your bed while you lie on the floor? Why me? Make it make sense.”

He says nothing, and it’s like talking to a mountain. “Shall I stand? Sit? Do a dance for you?” I’m poking the bear, and his lack of reaction only infuriates me more. It’s my life he’s playing with, and he doesn’t seem to care.

Khan turns his head, looking me up and down. "I was wrong before."

"About what?"

"I called you a peacetime woman. Out there, you did what you had to do. No hesitation."

"I just did what I needed to. That's all."

"He would have died if it wasn't for you."

"You think it always goes well? It doesn't. There's been times I wasn't enough, and I did everything I could, and it still ended bad. And I learned from it. But you, you just sit around, blaming yourself for what happened so long ago. You might be happy sitting here waiting to die, but I'm not."

I know my words are dangerous, that he told me not to mention his tribe, but I'm tired of him changing the subject, of his stony silences, of his infuriating presence. "You think I don't see what's going on? You won't take anything to help your pain. You felt guilty getting a massage for your headaches, you train even though your arm needs rest. I get it. You want to hurt, then you want to die. But why me? Why point me out and drag me into it?"

He doesn't answer. He turns his head, staring straight forward at the wall, drawing up and hunching forward, hands on his huge thighs. Khan is a titan of a man, brute strength and power, and all of it is wasted, turned against other warriors trapped in the same pit.

The silence stretches, and I can't take it any longer. I stand up, the chair clattering behind me, all my helpless frustration boiling up as I stalk in front of him while he stares straight through me like I don't exist. "No, you don't get to sit there like a wall.

If it wasn't for you, I'd have been bought by that rich fool and found a way to get out. This place is like a jail." I cross my arms, tight, because I want to reach out and punch him.

"I did not choose you."

"You bloody well did."

Suddenly, he's standing, towering over me, twice my size, and I bite my tongue, regretting my words. "When I saw you, tied up naked, I was moving before I could think."

He was like a statue, my words washing over him, but now he's alive and vital, his lips curled back showing his fangs. I step back, and he steps forward, until my back hits the wall, and there's nothing but the orc in front of me, my entire vision taken up by the wall of green muscles and his power, every breath filled with his masculine sweat.

"I was ready to die before I tasted your scent." He raises his hand, running his finger over my jaw like I am made of porcelain, his finger grazing my lip, and I gasp, pressing my back against the wall, with nowhere to run.

"What are you doing?" My voice wavers as I speak, the rush of sensations pulsing up in me, dark tendrils of need gripping me.

"I can smell it in your scent. What you crave." His voice is a low growl, deep and hypnotic. I bring my hands up, pressing them against his broad chest. At first I want to push him away, but when I touch the wall of power that is him, my fingers running over his sweaty muscles, my hands tremble. He drives me insane, an old lion who refuses to die, the embers of his being sparked anew.

“Is this your plan, Maya? Seduce me? Bind me to you, so I help you escape?”

I can't speak. My chest is rising and falling as my heart pounds, his finger tracing down from my lips, running against my neck, touching my collarbone, making me shiver. “You should be careful, Maya. How do you know I won't keep you as my pet? Train you to be my little toy and never let you free?”

“That's not you,” I manage, breathless.

“I'm a brute. I'm a killer.”

“Then you wouldn't care if those two novices died.”

His hand opens around my throat and slowly closes, between me and the wall, and with one squeeze, he could end me. It only makes heat flush between my legs, feverish, my body aching for him to take me. His cock rears up, thickening and pressing out from his black loincloth, and I glance down past his forearm at my throat to the huge heft of it as it grows and grows, this massive, green rod that pulses with every beat of his heart. It would rip me in two.

He breathes in, nostrils flaring, tasting my scent, tasting the darkness of my uncontrollable lust. He drives me to madness. “You're scared of me,” he growls, as he holds his hand around my throat, able to feel the rapid beating of my heart as it pulses in my neck.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“You’re the one who’s scared,” I whisper, and my shaking hands lower, tracing the ridges of his abs, a shiver running through my body as I cannot stop myself, knowing that what I’m doing will change me forever, that he will ruin me for any other man, but as terrified as I am, my lust is controlling me, this primal wave of need that makes me feel so empty, so alone, craving his huge arms pulling me tight against his body. His power is washing through me, overwhelming, this unyielding strength that reassures me in the chaos of my life.

He growls, then leans in closer, his lips pressing against mine as he kisses me, ravenous, sending electricity through my veins. His huge tongue swirls against mine, and I am brought into the moment completely, life melting away, until only he exists, and his hunger, his cock surging up as I slide my fingers down his taut abs, until I reach his throbbing member. I try to wrap my hand around it, but he’s too thick, and his cock spurts pre-cum like a faucet, thick, creamy liquid coating the shaft and his hand, as if designed to force that monstrous thing past my innocence, to claim me forever.

His fist slams against the wall, thudding heavily as he breaks off the kiss. My legs shake, and I’m weak, staring up at him as he pulls back and stalks out of the bedroom, leaving me confused, so alone, unable to understand him.

He slams the door behind him. It makes me start, and I fall to the floor, all the stress and confusion returning a thousandfold, and I feel completely hopeless, with no idea what to do.

KHAN

I storm out, enraged at myself, and nearly run into Garvin. He glances down at my obvious arousal, then up at me.

“I’m headed to the city,” he says, completely ignoring my throbbing cock that feels so heavy and full it could burst, the touch of her nimble fingers still fresh in my memory. “Want me to get something for your lady love? Chocolate usually smooths things over, in my experience.”

Any other man and I’d put my fist through his head. Garvin’s known me eight years. We’re not friends, but he’s the closest thing I have to one anymore. He’s the only one who wouldn’t turn tail seeing me this pissed off.

I think back to a comment she made, when she was offering me stillroot for the pain in my leg.

“She mentioned tea. Not bitter. That ruins the taste.”

“On it.” He tries to bite back his words, but can’t resist continuing.

“I’ve stayed alive a long time not butting my head into other people’s business, but I’m pretty loose right now,” says Garvin, patting his flask in his breast pocket. “That’s a good woman there. Who knows, maybe Shug would sell your contract over to some pitmaster in the Capital, you could work as a trainer, take her with you.”

It’s custom. When gladiators get injured or age out of fights, if they’ve served well they get moved into new roles. Some even earn their freedom.

“Just get the tea.” I limp past him, each step making my knee grind, the spell she has on me weakening. When her scent is in my nostrils, my thoughts are consumed by

raging need, a volcanic lust for her, for life.

Now, as I make my way up the stone hallway, my pain returns. My left arm is stiffening, and I wonder if my next fight will be my last. I am up against an orc from the far southern regions, plucked up from the desert. I've heard tale of him. He fights with a five-foot-long curved blade, a scimitar that could cut chunks off my body if I'm slow.

When I gave myself to the pits, I knew that the end of my life would be staring up at a glinting blade. I've thought of the moment endlessly.

I have never been felled. I have never been on my back, waiting for judgment. One day, it is inevitable. The people flock to my fights, put up against the toughest competitors, screaming for me, others filled with bloodlust for my downfall. They want to see how long I can hold on to my position of champion of Corwinhold.

They want to see who will take me down.

I march onto the sands of the training ground. I yell at the three men chatting like they're gossiping at the market, and they pick up their weapons as I size up Orin. At 6'5, the half-orc is the closest I'll find to my foe.

The tension in my head is back, the constant, incessant throbbing at my temples, the headache that has been plaguing me since my jaw was crushed. I crave her fingers against my neck working into the knots, her gentle, soothing touch.

"Orin! You against me!" I bark out, and the half-orc turns, drawing his blade.

Our bodies slam together with a heavy, meaty crunch, both of us grunting as the pain washes over me, centering me. It belongs to me, and I to it, until I am released by death.

MAYA

I've been sitting on the floor, listening to the sounds of wooden weapons slamming against each other, of grunts and groans of pain, and I feel so useless, so out of place in this cage, when I pull myself up. I leave the room, looking down the long hallway. All the gladiators are out in the training grounds, so I muster my courage, and try the door across the hall. It's unlocked, and I peer in. Just as I thought—I didn't hear a peep from across the hall.

I managed to create a makeshift hospital in my home back in the village. Previously, people would be treated in Mariel's little hut, but I didn't want to take it over and leave my mom alone. The room in front of me is small, not much more than a bed, empty of all belongings, but there is a fireplace which can be used to boil water to sterilize instruments.

It would be better if I could get closer to the training ground. I close the door softly and check the rooms down the hallway. Some are in use, others empty, with most of the gladiators packed into the common mess hall and dormitories. I guess Shug holds these private rooms like a carrot on a stick for the fighters. I have to hold my nose when I open the door into what must be Garvin's room, because he has a bathtub, but it's filled with clear liquid with a tube running off it and into a big copper container and it must be some makeshift distillery. It's near pure alcohol, and it will be perfect for sterilization.

There's an empty room near the hallway that leads to the entrance of the training ground. There's a barred window, that looks out to the grounds, and as I map out how the field hospital will look, I find myself walking to the window and peering out.

Khan is up against the two half-orcs. They circle him warily, long, wooden swords in

their hands, darting forward and probing. I wince as one of their swords strikes him under his left arm, but he keeps it up, protecting his face as he pivots, all his weight on his injured knee, and he buckles for a second. The two half-orcs strike at once, slamming their wooden blades into his chest, striking him hard, and I have to look away, sick to my stomach.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

He's pushing himself far beyond any limit. He thinks he's invincible, or worse, he doesn't admit to himself he needs rest. I clench my fist, because I shouldn't care about him. All he's done is make my life harder, but I want him to be safe, and it goes beyond the normal worry I have for a patient.

I groan as I push the bed towards the wall, busying myself in the work. The floor is dusty, the lamp swinging without oil, and I'll need to sweep up and clean first. Next, I go to the mess hall, where a couple gladiators are leaning back in their beds, doing nothing, resting after their training session. They are older, in their late thirties, old warriors who have put in their time.

“Hey, I'm trying to set up a treatment room. Could you guys point me to some cleaning stuff?”

One of them, with a scar running over his cheek, points to the side of the room, where a crooked broom is leaned against the wall. It's got cobwebs running from it to the stone walls. “And fresh clothes?”

“Closet across from us,” grunts the gladiator, not even sparing the energy to turn his head to look at me.

“Thanks,” I say, and take the broom, brushing off the cobwebs, and find the closet he's talking about. It's a treasure trove—clean white bedding, rows of fresh clothes, and, luckily enough, oil for the lamps. As well, there's some bars of soap and rags for cleaning. This must be the storage closet for the cleaner who attends to the gladiators' quarters, which is why the entire place isn't a pigsty. There's a pile of firewood and a dented kettle.

I have to ask the gladiator for help to start the fire, because I couldn't find flint, which he does with a grumble. He shows me how to light the lamp, which casts an uneven glow, but it's better than nothing.

First up, getting rid of the layer of dust. The cleaners obviously ignore the empty rooms. I get to work, losing myself in the reassuring, rhythmic movements, sweeping the dust out of the room then scrubbing every inch of it with soap and hot water. Then I replace the bedding. I hope the cleaner doesn't get in trouble, but I rip even strips of cloth from a bedspread, which I can use as bandages. When I'm nearly done, a wave of stress pulses over me.

I'm preparing this place like I plan to be here for years.

Someone clears their throat from behind me. I turn to see Peter standing, nodding his head in approval.

"Nice work here."

"Thank you. I need a hell of a lot of medical supplies, but it's a start."

"If I get a broken arm, I'm going to you, not that drunk bastard up in the estate."

I give him an expectant look and wipe the sweat from my forehead. I've been working hard, and the rough cloth of the vestment is sticking to me. I saw a few pieces of clothes that might have worked in the closet, but I don't want to steal from some gladiator, and plus, I'd rather change after a bath.

"Oh. There's a guard waiting for you. Shug wants to see you."

"Oh, yeah," I say, trying to keep calm, while inside my heart races.

“He saw you help Brenn, he probably wants to see if you need supplies or something. Always looking out for his investment.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I walk past him. “Hey, Maya. What you did today for Brenn...no one really looks out for us. Khan does though. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. And I feel like you’re the same.”

“I better get going,” I say, feeling awkward from the praise. Families would sometimes bring me gifts after I helped one of them, fresh baked goods, flowers, and people in the village always came by if we needed anything. It took me a while, but my mom told me to do my best to accept the gifts graciously, saying that the gift-giving was more for them than for me.

Now my home feels so far away.

I smooth my wrinkled clothes. If the pitmaster is annoyed I’m showing up unkempt, he’s just going to have to deal with it. I walk down the long corridor, and past the iron bars of the first layer of security stands a bored-looking guard. A handcuff dangles from his hand. “Is that really necessary?”

“Turn around, put your hands through the hole,” he says, and I do as he orders, feeling the irons clap around me. Then he opens the door, and I walk through into the entrance hallway, before the iron-clad wooden front entrance. He knocks, and the wooden panel opens, another guard looking in, then opens the door.

I don’t know if Shug is paranoid or just smart.

The evening breeze cools my sweaty skin, making my rough clothes stick to my body as I am walked up the gently sloping hill to the powerful opulence of the pitmaster’s

estate. As I get nearer, it's obvious that the façade of beauty masks the true nature of the manor. Huge pillars, thick stone walls, battlements and slit-like windows, sitting atop an easily defensible hill. The ramparts are crawling with guards, some with huge crossbows attached to the stone walls on pivots, too heavy for a man to lift, and they don't look bored of their jobs.

The front wooden doors, iron barred and imposing, are opened by a pair of burly guards, and I am escorted into the entrance hall of Shug's huge estate. The grand hall is illuminated by huge chandeliers filled with candles, and as I glance upwards, I note the shuttered windows on either side of the twin staircases curving up into the fortress. I've got the feeling those windows have guards with crossbows on the other side, and that they can pour down hot oil if he is attacked.

The paranoid pitmaster even went so far as to have me handcuffed as I am marched up the winding staircase. The guard walks behind me, and I take each step carefully, not wanting to trust him to catch me if I fall.

A surge of longing for Khan rushes through me. With him at my back, I wouldn't be scared of anything.

I'm taken through a long hallway lit by swaying oil lamps, casting an eerie glow on the hunting trophies lining the walls, the heads of lions, huge elk with antlers that stretch farther out than I could outstretch my arms, and the pelt of a dire wolf with fangs that gleam, the black, glass eyes of the creature seeming to watch me as the fire lights on them strangely.

The guard takes me onto the balcony, where Shug is at a small wooden table, leaning over a plate of bony pink fish, which he picks at carefully with a fork. His face is fleshy and tanned from long days in the sun, his beady eyes with a cunning to them as he turns his head to watch me. He waves at the guard. "Uncuff her."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Yes, sir,” he says, undoing the cuffs in a practiced movement.

“You can leave,” says Shug, eyeing me up and down, ignoring the guard as he walks back into the estate. He motions to the chair, and I take my seat. The sounds of the gladiators training endlessly travel in the cool evening air as the sun sets, casting a bloody glow over the horizon. Under the table, there’s a large leather satchel.

Shug dissects the fish like a surgeon. “My doctor said you did a good job today. Brenn will be recovered for the fight.”

“And is he planned to win that fight, or did I save his life for you to throw it away?”

“I see you’re starting to understand how this bloody business works. He’s got an even match.”

To my side, I look down over the balcony as the gladiators leave one by one, chatting with each other and stretching at the end of a long day of training. Two remain, the newcomers. Khan was right. The one who could have slept on a comfortable bed chose the sand out of solidarity.

“And those two? Do they have a chance?”

“Very little.” He sighs. “I sent my eldest son to the capital for training. I’d rather he chooses another path than this one.”

“It did well for you,” I say, motioning to the sprawling estate. “Are you thinking of leaving the business?”

“Sharp. My portfolio would be worth more with a doctor who isn’t half in drink by noon. But I didn’t bring you here to offer you a job.”

“Then why am I here?”

He twists his fork, scraping a bone clean, the pink, fatty flesh of the fish disappearing between his large lips. “I do my homework. You were taking herbs from Corwin’s swamp. Valuable ones, but you weren’t selling them. You were using them for your village. They need you,” he says, waving his fork in the general direction of my village. “I’ve got a way to get you back.”

I sit rigid in the wooden chair across from him, not trusting a word he says, but the gnawing hope makes me open my mouth. “How?”

“You’ve pieced together why I brought Khan to the slave auctions.”

I nod.

“Explain.”

“You view your gladiators as investments. Khan is nearing the end of his useful lifespan for you. There’s more value in breeding him.”

Shug smiles for a moment, but it doesn’t touch his eyes. “He’s got another decade left in him. But you’re half right. But see, you’ve put a little thorn in my plan. The same reason I’ve had to triple my guards.”

“And that is?”

“When an orc gets the scent of a woman, it drives him to madness. It happened six years ago to another pitmaster. During a fight. His orc won, but he got the scent of a

noblewoman in the crowd. He had to be put down. He got halfway up the wall before they turned him into a pincushion. Khan won't touch those three breeding women I bought. Not with you here."

My heart quickens. I try to calm myself with the thought that if he was going to kill me to get me out of the way, he wouldn't warn me first.

He pulls the leather satchel up, placing it on the table. "Supplies. For you to set up your little field hospital. I'll be bringing you to the fights as well, to work in the arena's hospital."

I don't touch it. I just watch him, carefully, waiting for him to speak.

He unbuckles it and opens it, pulling out a bag of dried leaves. "You know what these are?"

"Yes."

He looks at me expectantly. I reach out to the bag of leaves, open it, and pull one out, placing it on my tongue, and wait twenty seconds. Then I pull it out, already knowing it won't change color, that there is no chance I am pregnant. Many a woman has put the leaf in her mouth before, some praying it will change, others for the opposite result, often after a night they regretted.

"Pity."

"It usually takes a few days to show a positive result," I say, and I can tell he knew that before he gave it to me. He's testing my knowledge of herbs.

"Alf, the pitmaster I'm preparing the event with, had the idea to put Khan in the ring with four of his handpicked female slaves. He would pay me a handsome studding

fee, of course. But I told him it was useless with you here. He told me I should kill you.”

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a foot-long, wide glass vial. “For me, I prefer the less messy route. Fill this with his seed. Put three full vials under the bathtub in the hospital room you’ve made.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“How do you expect me to get that from him?”

“I’ve found that people get creative when the alternative is...unpleasant,” he says, letting the word hang in the air. “That’s all I need from you. A few vials full, and I will release you from your contract.”

The memory of my home tortures me. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?”

The sun is setting, a strange, gloomy tint that makes the weight of his words sink into me.

“You saw my value as a medic. Why would you throw that away?”

“Because I do my homework. And I’m not going to have someone in my estate who knows how to make it look like I had a heart attack. I’ve already gone through one food taster in my life, and I’m not eager to go through another.”

He whistles, and the guard appears from the doorway. He’s got a burlap sack with him. “Take her back to her quarters.”

“Yes, sir,” says the guard, and he cuffs me, slinging the leather satchel over his shoulder with the burlap sack in his other hand.

“You can never be too careful,” says Shug, as he watches the handcuffs clip around my wrists.

I'm marched down, and only once I am back in the gladiators' quarters does the guard point to the white bag. "Clothes," he says, and leaves.

I open the bag. A worn linen shift, a woolen skirt, frayed, and other mismatched clothes, but it's better than the stinking vestment I've been wearing. After the conversation with Shug, I have the overwhelming urge to get clean.

I walk towards Khan's bedroom, pressure mounting. What do I do?

It's a way out.

All I need to do is fill three vials, and Shug will let me free. Khan's raging, barely repressed need will not wait much longer. He's on the verge of snapping, each moment with me torturous, our bodies aching for each other, holding back by sheer will alone. In my moment of weakness, I craved him, meeting his kiss, running my hand over his huge, throbbing cock.

I pause in front of Khan's door, and it takes a supreme effort to open it.

Khan is pulling himself from the bath, his huge cock swinging between his legs, grabbing a towel. He glances at me and sits heavily on the bed. The green skin under his arm has turned a dark purple, and he sits with his right leg outstretched, to relieve the pain from it.

"What did you discuss with Shug?" he asks, his eyes flitting to the leather satchel then back up to me.

"He set me up with supplies for the hospital," I say. "I really need a bath."

He motions to the bathtub, still filled with soapy, hot water.

He's already seen me naked once. He's sitting with the towel barely covering his legs and cock, his wet, muscled body exposed, his arm so tired that the movement of drying himself would be agony.

I open the leather satchel, looking through the contents. The doctor, though a drunk, still had the sense to fill it with everything I'd need. I pull out a vial of dark brown liquid. Distilled stillroot. "That arm of yours is going to keep swelling up. You're going against an orc. You might as well tie your arm behind your back, because it will be useless if you don't let me give you something."

Guilt seeps through me. The strillroot is just one of the ingredients I'll give him to help his arm stop swelling...

But it will also make him sleep, deeply. He won't hear anything. All I have to do is get him to snap, to fill me with his seed, then once he is asleep, let it slip out of me and into one of the vials.

His emerald eyes stare through my soul.

"There's going to be a dozen more Peters who will die if you don't survive this next fight. Maybe you're ready for the grave, but they don't deserve that."

I'm sick to my stomach, knowing how to manipulate him. "You might not think you're a chieftain anymore, but these gladiators look up to you like one."

"Alright," he growls, his voice deep and rumbling. I take a cup from the table and mix up a concoction that will soothe him, that will help his left arm heal...

And give him a restful sleep. He downs the glass in one gulp, his face unchanged at the foul, bitter taste, and leans forward, his hands on his knees, a wounded titan.

I reach up to my clothes. If I'm going to go through with this, I need to master myself.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I slip out of the clothes, and his eyes run up and down my naked body as I slide into the bathtub.

14

KHAN

Her clothes drop to the floor, and she is nude in front of me, her perfect curves and sensuous figure so different than my hard lines. She is everything I want, everything I do not deserve, but my cock throbs in lust as I taste her scent. She slips into the bath, slowly sliding into the steaming hot waters, her head barely above the water.

I stand, slowly, my knee protesting, the arcs of lightning pain shooting up my back, and walk to her. She looks up at me, and I want to stare at her forever, freeze this moment. I gently run my hand through her hair, and her lips part, and I cannot stop myself. I lean in and kiss her, her lips perfect, so soft, against mine.

I break the kiss off, my cock swelling, the fire for her overpowering all my pain, but I pull away and sit back on my bed. She is the only woman who has not looked at me as the monster I am.

I want her to know me.

“It was eight years ago.”

It's like I can feel the wind whipping the snow against me, my furs tight around me as I lead my men towards the herds.

“The herds did not follow their usual path. They went into the king’s land, and I had been hunting them with my trusted men for weeks. A young orc, Brond, he begged me to take him with me. He’d only hunted our grounds before. I thought him old enough.”

She is watching me, intent on my every word.

“The storm started. I could have turned back.”

“I followed the herd to the great frozen lake, when the ambush hit us. The king’s men, with rifles that thundered out. Visibility was poor. I could have rallied my men into an attack and overwhelmed them. But I did not know how many they were. I did not want to take Brond into his first battle. I led my men into the frozen lake, to wait for the storm to pass.”

I can remember the snow so thick I could barely see a foot in front of me. Hunkering down with my men, waiting for the storm to pass.

“Days...weeks. We lost track of where we were, without the stars to show us the way. Hungry and weak, I tried to lead us back. When the storm cleared...”

I swallow. Hard. “I had led them deeper into the king’s lands. I’d run from a patrol and led them straight into an entire regiment. They were as surprised as we were. These ones were outfitted in technology. Weapons that shot out lightning. Glimmering armor that would have stopped our swords. I couldn’t even order a retreat. Six of my men were cut down. Others ran. They will have been hunted down. I got hit here,” I say, running my hand over my chest, where the blow that should have killed me seared through my flesh and knocked me to the ground instead.

“I woke up in a cell. Shug was there, on the other side of the bars. He bought me before I could go to the general auctions. And I told myself that I had died on that

day. That I would fight until it was done. Then I met you, Maya.”

I breathe in her scent, the perfect, feminine tone that is hers and hers alone. “I didn’t take your medicine because of duty to the other gladiators. I took it because now I have something to come back to.”

Her eyes are wet, and a tear drips down her cheek. I hate to see her in pain. My own knee is throbbing less, the pain muted, my arm feeling more nimble already, but the pressure behind my eyes is increasing. The headache has come back with a vengeance.

“You’re not the monster, Khan. I am.”

“What do you speak of?”

“In that leather bag, there’s three vials. Shug told me if I don’t fill them with your seed, he’s going to kill me. I was going to...I...” Her voice breaks.

A surge of rage fills me. I never felt anything for or against Shug. He was just part of my path to peace, putting me up against champion after champion. Now he has threatened the one woman I care about.

Her confession only makes me care more about her. She is a healer. She never could have gone through with it. With an axe hanging over her head, it took her only minutes to make the noble choice.

“He will never touch you.”

“You don’t hate me?”

“No. But I will not have sons born to the same life as mine.”

“I...I have a plan.”

“What is it?”

“Garvin can go to the markets as he pleases, right? Do you trust him? There’s an herb he could get. It would kill your seed, but Shug would never know. But...Garvin’s no fool. He would know what it is. He could betray us.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“We can trust him.” He’s never gone against me.

Stabbing pain shoots through my head from my temple. The headache pulses relentlessly.

“Your head. The stillroot isn’t helping.”

“It’s nothing.”

She pulls herself out of the tub. Water drips down her breasts, and as I drink her up, my cock surges to life, the incessant painful need that will consume my being until I have her. She goes onto the bed behind me and runs her wet fingers over the back of my neck, working out the knots, the throbbing pain slowly soothing under her magical touch.

“I’m not going to pretend to know what it is to lead men. But I know what it is to make a mistake. I...I don’t like to talk about it. But there was a man I could have saved. He got into a terrible accident. His leg...it needed to be amputated. I knew it had to be. But he begged, he pleaded, he told me he didn’t want to live like that, and I thought...I thought maybe I was wrong. That I would be taking a man’s leg and leaving him like that for the rest of my life. It was two weeks after I became the healer for our village, after Mariel, the town healer, had to leave. It was the first time I was alone in a life or death situation.”

Her hands slow, then she presses her knuckles into my neck, the throbbing pain lessening. “His leg got infected, and he died three weeks later. Slowly. I gave him stillroot for the pain, and when I knew he wasn’t going to make it...I gave him a dose

I knew he wouldn't wake up from. Maybe you made the wrong decision, in that moment, and maybe you'd do everything you can to take it back, to change it, but you can't, Khan. You can only live with it."

I can hear her swallow. "And I knew if I did what Shug ordered me to, I'd regret it for the rest of my life."

I turn, facing her. She's shaking, her eyes wet with tears, and I look at her perfection, and I vow to myself...

I will get her out of here.

15

MAYA

Guilt wracks my soul. It had been gnawing at me since I stepped into his room, this horrible sensation that I would damn him, damn his children, all to save my own life, and when he told me his story, the truth spilled past my lips.

It was the greatest relief.

He turns his head, staring at me, beautiful in his own way, this hulking monster of a man with broad, powerful features, his gleaming white fangs that could shear through muscles, his powerful shoulders, every inch of him masculine perfection designed to destroy his enemies, but that is not all he is.

He is a protector.

"I'm going to get you out of here, Maya," he says, and then he kisses me. When he kissed me in the bathtub, the tension and guilt built up to an awful crescendo, but now

all my fear melts away as I return his savage, hungry kiss, knowing instinctively that I am meant to be his. There is a desperation as our lips press together, as if he has been waiting lifetimes for this moment. He pulls me closer against him, and he's burning up, as feverish lust boils up through me.

His tongue swirls against mine, then he breaks off the kiss, running his massive tongue down my neck. His hands roam wildly over my curves as his tongue slides down my neck. His fangs graze against my too-sensitive skin, and I can feel his heart pounding a wild rhythm against mine.

Khan presses me down against the bed, his body lit by the swaying light of the oil lamp, casting wild shadows over his powerful muscles. His huge hands squeeze my breasts, pulling my hard nipples upwards, and I moan in need as he presses my breasts together and runs his tongue over my nipples, back and forth, sending waves of pleasure through me. His hands are like iron, crushing my breasts together as he laves them with his tongue, then he runs that huge, hot, wet tongue down my stomach, pinching and pulling my nipples relentlessly, setting fire to every fiber of my being as I spread my legs instinctively for him and he kisses my virgin slit.

I'm soaking wet for him, trembling with lust as he laps at my pussy like he is dying of thirst, pure hunger, without technique, molten pleasure sending shockwaves through me as my hips buck upwards. He pinches my nipples with each lave of his tongue, and I moan out, overwhelmed by his power. His huge hands slide down my body, gripping my thighs, opening me up as he stares up at me, his green eyes wild, his black hair curling down his huge shoulders, every inch of him pure power. I can feel my orgasm welling up, and he grips my ass possessively, pulling me up against his mouth.

"Khan," I gasp as the waves of pleasure rush through me. His tongue laps furiously, faster and faster, coaxing out every wave of pleasure, but instead of sating me, I feel so empty, so filled with need for him, my pussy tingling with desire to be claimed by

the brute.

He mounts me, his huge body on top of me, his lips wet with my arousal, and his huge, throbbing cock rests on my stomach, the thick weight of it against me. He's so fucking huge I can't believe it, the massive, jade rod with two grapefruit-sized balls dangling beneath, so full of his seed. The smell of him overwhelms me, the deep musk of the beast, and my mind is swirling with the afterglow of the first orgasm that only makes me crave more. I know, deep down, that if he fucks me once, when he shoots every drop of his seed into me, I'll be mated to him for eternity, that his seed will take root, and I can see in his burning green eyes he knows it too.

I grab his cock and stroke furiously with both hands, as he thrusts, wishing he was inside me, knowing that it would hurt, knowing he would ruin me forever, yet craving it more than I thought possible.

He roars as his cock stiffens, and it spurts, a huge, creamy load of seed that splashes against my mouth, the next rope of his cum coating my breasts. His voice booms out, and I know every gladiator in the compound can hear him, and I don't care, stroking his pulsing cock, reaching down with one hand and massaging his huge balls as he unleashes on me, until I am covered in his seed. I turn, and his seed drips on the bed as he collapses next to me, panting, and I curl into his strength as he wraps his massive hands around me. I'm exhausted but more alive than ever before, my skin tingling, my heart racing, reality so intense it feels like a dream.

He kisses the back of my head, tender. "I will have you, Maya. I will get you free of this place, and I will have you. That is my promise."

"I want that more than anything," I whisper back, shivering with desire, aching for him to be inside me, aching for all his rage and power to be unleashed, for him to claim me and not hold back.

The specter of fear fills me. “Shug isn’t stupid. He’s tripled the guards. Crossbows.”

“I will find a way.”

He sounds so certain, I can almost believe him.

KHAN

I wake before the dawn, my woman in my arms, the searing pain in my arm and leg reduced to a dull ache. My eyes adjust to the darkness, and I can see my seed covering her body. All I wanted last night was to thrust myself into her, to bind her to me for eternity.

I could not. Not until the sky is endless above me. Not until there are no walls keeping us in.

I extract myself from her gently, and she mumbles in her sleep. She is all that is good in this world. I open the door softly, closing it gently behind me so I do not wake her

I go to the dorms first, moving silently, but I can see Garvin blinking awake. He sleeps like a cat, that one, and he watches me as I go to empty beds and grab blankets. He earned a private room, but turned it into a distillery, preferring to sleep with the rank and file.

He closes his eyes again, as I stride out to the training grounds. The two men are lying in each other's arms for warmth. I throw the blankets at them, and they wake, fear in their eyes, before grabbing them gratefully.

I reach out with both arms, and they take my hands. I lift them to their feet. "You did well yesterday. Today you rest with the other gladiators who will fight. You are one of us now, and tomorrow you will be reborn."

They're scared. I can smell it. But there's a new resilience in them.

I hope it's enough. I can never get used to it. Training young gladiators, who enter the ring and never walk back out.

I glance up the hill. The breakfast cart is trundling down the hill. A day before a fight, I request the chefs for an extra meal for my men, to load up on strength and recover. The day of the fight, everyone has their own choices. Some eat a huge meal, and gladiators are given extra rations at their request, some down plates of pancakes covered in honey and cream, others biting off huge chunks of cheeses and bread. Their philosophy is that if they come out on the wrong end of things in the ring, they damn well better enjoy their morning. I eat light, and I don't touch a drop of alcohol the night before. I've seen too many men dull their fear in drink.

"What are your names?"

The bald one glances up, nervous to give the wrong answer. "You fight today. You live or die with your name."

"Felix."

The one with the broken teeth runs his tongue over the gaps. "Ethan."

We enter the dining hall as servants bring in the food and light the oil lamps. Some gladiators pull their blankets over their heads, hiding their eyes from the light. Garvin's already up and stretching, doing his morning routine of pushups and bodyweight squats.

"Get some food, get some rest, then report to the medical bay."

The breakfast cart is laden with plates of egg, bacon, and bread, and Felix and Ethan rush to it, exhausted, grabbing huge wooden plates and crawling into bed, where they are so tired they can barely chew. I trained them hard. Today they will rest, and

tomorrow, they will face the Gods' judgment.

I take a wooden plate and load it with scrambled eggs, easily digested protein, and sit at the long wooden table. Garvin finishes his exercise and joins me, pouring a carafe of coffee which he supplements with his flask, taking nothing but an end of bread.

"You're not limping as much," he states.

I reach my left arm out sideways, flexing the muscle. The pain is still there, but my flexibility is improved. "Maya. She gave me a potion last night to reduce swelling. Something for the pain as well."

"I never thought you'd take a woman. She's good for you, that one."

I lean in. "I need you to get something for me at the market."

"Whatever you need."

"Baneroot paste."

His eyebrows raise. "Mate, just pull out. That shit numbs you until you can't feel it. I had a women insist I coat my cock with it, she was loving it, but it took me two hours just to bust."

He sees the look in my eyes and takes a big sip of his coffee. "Alright, I get it, you're not interested in my love life. But if I'm going to get this for you, I've got one condition."

"Name it."

"You finally listen to my story about those two noblewomen who watched me fight

back in my prime, when I owned that fucking ring. Their husbands had no idea they were sneaking off to the gladiators' stable after... Oy! And part of the deal, you have to at least look interested."

I suppress a sigh and take a huge bite of scrambled eggs as he goes into excruciating detail."

"And when I was done, mate, all I wanted to do was sleep, I swear to you, they told me they'd have me killed if I didn't go another round. Can you imagine that?"

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“I cannot imagine that,” I state, finishing my plate of food. “Did that suffice?”

“Oh no, I’m just getting started. Did I ever tell you about the little minx who pulled a knife out while I bedded her?”

“It seems like these women don’t know if they want to fuck you or kill you.”

“Same emotions, really,” grins Garvin, and I get myself a mug of strong, black coffee, because this is going to be a long morning.

17

MAYA

“Alright Ethan, take off your shirt,” I say. He’s sitting on the bed, while Felix is on the wooden chair, constantly running his hand over his bald scalp. The two of them look like men who know they are going to the gallows. Ethan groans as he pulls off his tunic, and I assess his collection of welts and bruises.

“Nothing serious. I’ll give you a tonic to put on the welts, and tomorrow you’ll be back to normal.”

“I could use a fucking pint of stillroot,” says Ethan.

“You wouldn’t wake up after that.”

“I know. I’d just go off in a dreamless fucking sleep, and not have to face that...that

monster tomorrow.”

I hand him the bottle of tonic, which I brewed up this morning, and a small vial of medium-strength stillroot. “This will help you sleep tonight.”

“Thank you,” he says, and pulls his tunic back on, leaving. I point to the bed, and Felix takes his place. It’s cool, but he’s sweating.

“Hey. You’ve a chance tomorrow. Don’t give up hope.”

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m going up against an orc.” He pulls off his shirt without asking. He’s got a cut on his chest from a blow, and I clean it, bandage him up, and give him the same medications as Ethan. His gaze is fixated on the floor, and I follow it to a tiny ant, crawling across the stone floor.

“Tomorrow, that ant will be here, and I won’t,” he says, his face pale as he shudders, pulling his clothes back on and leaving me alone in my makeshift hospital.

When he leaves, I lose my mask and sit down heavily on the wooden chair. I’ve helped people pass before. I’ve helped them come to terms with their fears, held their hand as they died, but I’ve never seen this, a perfectly healthy man who knows he is going to die. It would be merciful to give them a larger dose of stillroot, but any more and it could affect their performance in combat. If Khan thinks they have a chance, I have to give it to them, no matter how badly I want to soothe their terror.

There’s a heavy knock at the door. “Come in,” I say, and Khan enters. He’s not training today, and he is in light, flowing grey pants and a white t-shirt that hugs his muscles. I smile, feeling better already to be in his presence, sitting back in the chair and appreciating the view. He closes the door behind him.

“Garvin went to the market this morning.”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a glass jar. I recognize the banesroot by the light, white color of the paste, but I open it and give it a smell to make sure. “And you trust him?”

“I do. Are you sure this...banesroot will kill the seed?”

I nod. “Mixed in the vials, certainly.”

“Garvin told me that...it can be used another way.” I can see the clear outline of his monstrous cock against his grey pants, and it comes to life, blood flowing into his massive member.

I bite my lip. “I’d tell you what I tell women who come to me about it...it works well, but it’s not perfect. But if you combine with pulling out...”

Khan grins. “I don’t trust myself. When I’m inside you, I’ll lose all control.” My mouth goes dry, my nipples hardening, as I imagine him ravaging me, his powerful hips thrusting that massive cock in and out of me, his cock stiffening and pulsing as he drives it so deep inside me and can’t pull out.

I clear my throat, suddenly feeling awkward, my cheeks flushed red as I look towards the leather bag. “Should we...”

“Of course.” Khan reaches into the leather bag, pulling out one of the long vials. If last night hadn’t happened, I would have thought there was no way for a man to fill one. I had to have a bath this morning to get clean.

“Would you like some privacy?” I ask, and to my shock, I blush.

He chuckles and sits back on the bed, and I bite my lip, looking at the door, then back to his huge, throbbing cock, clearly outlined against his grey pants. The head of his

cock stains his pants darker, dripping like a faucet, and I picture riding him, my hands on his huge chest muscles, grinding that thing deeper and deeper into me. I glance at the jar of banesroot. It would be so easy to coat his cock with it and take the risk...

I can't wait to hear his groan of pleasure, to make his eyes roll back, and I get up and kneel in front of him, looking up at the huge warrior. My hands shake as I reach up and undo his pants, pulling them down so his huge, jade cock rears up. I breathe in and smell the musk of his seed-filled balls, and my whole body trembles with need.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I take his shaft in my hand, marble-hard, silky smooth, and I can't even wrap my hand around his girth. All I can picture is that thing pressing into me, the stretching pleasure as he impales me. The head of his cock spurts creamy white pre-cum, dripping down his throbbing shaft, and I run my tongue from the base to the tip, tasting him. It just tastes right, in this primal way that makes me crave so much more.

"Fuck, you're so huge," I gasp out, my cheeks flushing red, because I've never felt this way before, this endless, uncontrollable need. He lets out a long, low groan, and his huge hand digs into my hair, fisting my curls and bringing my lips down against the head of his cock. I curl my tongue around it, my lips open to the limit, and his cock spurts into my mouth, and somehow it seems to soothe my jaw, making my gag reflex disappear as his hips buck and he presses his huge dick into my mouth. It's as if his orcish seed is made to let me please him, and he brings my head up and down against his cock, deeper and deeper, thrusting upwards as his huge, throbbing member slides into my mouth. I run my hands over his tree-trunk thighs, feeling the quivers of pleasure rippling through him, and every groan of need drives me wild, making me want to serve him more.

I reach out, trying to grab the vial, but my hand grabs for empty air, and then he grips my hair so tight it's painful, forcing every inch of his dick down my throat, roaring out in need as his cock stiffens. He unleashes, ropes of hot, creamy cum shoot straight into my stomach, and my pussy is tingling with desperate need with the way he manhandles and uses me.

His cock slowly softens, and he pulls it from my mouth as I gasp for air, my head swimming. "Fuck," I gasp, overwhelmed, this dark lust in me that I didn't know I had, loving the feeling of being used for his pleasure as if I am his toy.

“We failed,” he says, looking at the empty vials, and though I ache to have him inside me, I understand now how he loses control, how the breeding rage overwhelms him until he cannot think, until his only thought is to unleash inside of me. I can taste his seed in my mouth, salty and warm, and I swallow every drop instinctively.

“I didn’t...I didn’t think I’d enjoy doing that,” I say, my cheeks flushed red with embarrassment, and he strokes my cheek gently, then lifts me. I gasp as he throws me onto the bed, that hungry look in his eyes. He strips my clothes off roughly.

“Your turn,” he says, and I melt under his tongue, covering my mouth with my hand so that the other gladiators won’t hear my moans, but he grabs my wrists, forcing them down, so that everyone can hear my gasping orgasm as I cum under his hungry tongue.

His cock is already hard again, insatiable. “Already?” I say, when I can speak again.

“I’ll do it, it’s easier not to lose control,” he says, and grabs the vial. He strokes his hand up and down his huge cock, and I can’t resist massaging those full, huge balls, until his cock spurts again, wave after wave of seed, filling the vial, seed dripping down the sides.

“Do all orcs come so much?” I say, holding the vial up.

“I don’t come that much. It’s something about you being near.”

I take a deep breath in, trying to get back control of myself. There’s this tendril of lust that is never sated around him, that wraps through my being. I know that until he is inside me, until I look up at Khan, seeing the beastly mating rage overwhelming him as he ravages me, that I’ll have this aching need that will torment me endlessly. I put on my mask of a doctor to try to distance myself from it, opening the jar of the grey paste and mixing it with his seed. It will be inert.

“How long do you think until he realizes it?”

Khan shrugs. “I do not know. If one woman did not become pregnant, he would blame it on her. But three? We’ll buy no more than a week at most. He’s a shrewd man. He won’t let you free, not until he knows he has my children.”

“So all we’re doing is buying time.” I put the stopper in the vial and put it under the bathtub, as I was told.

“Our best chance is the games for Corwin’s son’s birthday. The entire city will be celebrating. The little lord likes to watch the bloody games, and his father arranged the greatest battles of the year.”

“How? I’ll be in the arena hospital, and you’ll be in the arena, fighting. And Shug isn’t the kind of man to let security lapse just because there’s a festival going on. If anything, he’ll be more alert.”

“I don’t know how yet. We’ll find a way. We have to,” he says. I bite my lip, the gnawing worry coming back. It goes away when I’m with Khan, lost to the passion, the naked lust pushing out all other thoughts. Now it’s returned with a vengeance, the black, hopeless feeling that I’ll be trapped here forever.

“How does he plan to keep this fresh, anyways?” I ask, pointing to the vial.

“Shug has a basement in his estate. A morgue, kept chilled, and a freezer room as well. Garvin told me about it. He’s got some degree of favor with the royal family.”

“A freezer room?”

“Yes. Imagine a room that is as cold as a snowbank, but there is no snow. Many of the richer pitmasters have them, to keep the corpses fresh. They get every ounce of

value out of their investments, even selling their bodies to the capital city.”

“What for?”

“I’ve heard rumors. That they have technology there, a way to put a young heart into an old man and make his beat anew. Ghouls. My people have funeral pyres.” He winces. “But my men didn’t even get that. It makes me sick to think that my people’s corpses are still in the Capital, that they will never have the peace of the fire.”

He smiles at me, sadly. “But I will not think of that. I promise you, Maya. I’ll find a way to get us free of this place. If it was only me...I’d climb the walls at night, try my luck against the guards. But with you on my back...I couldn’t risk it.”

Khan wraps his huge hand around mine, squeezing it tight, and I let myself feel those first embers of hope. “I trust you,” I say, and he gives me a gentle kiss.

18

MAYA

I’ve been a ball of stress since the moment I woke up in Khan’s arms. He was a rock, completely unaffected. I went with him to breakfast, but I couldn’t touch my food. He ate light, dried fruits and a glass of milk, while I poked my fork around the plate of scrambled eggs. The other gladiators who were scheduled to fight handled it in different ways, some pacing the hallways, others stretching and training, Felix praying quietly to himself in the corner, pale as a ghost.

Shug sent for me after breakfast. I hugged Khan, and he held me tight against his chest, telling me not to worry. For him, it is another day at the office. I don’t know how many times he’s faced this moment, but he’s got a quiet focus to him that bolsters me as I walk up the hill, escorted by a guard but without the handcuffs

around my wrists. I have my leather bag filled with herbs and poultices, and I prepared a mixture that will do well to stop infections for the kinds of wounds I expect the fighters to sustain.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

Shug is waiting outside of the stable, speaking to a white-haired man with a brown butcher's apron. At his belt, there is a short, curved knife and a pair of scissors, and I place him as the drunken doctor. There's a tall wagon with a wooden carriage, the doors open to show the bench seats, with four large horses whinnying in front. Next to the carriage is the prison wagon that I was transported to the estate in, thick iron bars to imprison the gladiators as they are moved to the arena.

Shug approaches me, and I stop in front of him.

"I fulfilled my end of the deal," I say, in a hushed voice.

"You did. The cleaner confirmed it. And once the seed takes root, I will release you to your home. Until then, you're going to earn your keep. There will be a new vial to fill tonight."

"You said when I—"

"You think I am a novice? You are an expert of herbs and potions. Those vials could be filled with anything. Once it is confirmed that you have fulfilled your end of the bargain, I will fulfill mine."

"You said three. You know how hard it was to get those? He'll get suspicious."

"You will do as I say. And you will speak to me with respect. Pitmaster, or sir." He licks his lips. "But you're right. I've amended the bargain to four vials. You will be rewarded for going above and beyond."

I try not to think of those three poor women. Did he have the guards hold them down while he inseminated them like breeding mares? I can only imagine how horrified they must have felt. They look at the Orc like a monster.

“Yes, pitmaster,” I say, and a guard helps me up into the carriage next to the white-haired doctor. He’s got a bulbous red nose, and he hands me a folded-up, brown apron.

“Put this on. You’ll need it,” he says, and I pull it over my clothes. “You did well under pressure yesterday. Where did you train?” he asks as Shug’s guards pile in on either side of the pitmaster, sitting across from us on the wooden benches as the driver cracks his whip, the horses taking off.

“Our village had an excellent healer. She taught me everything I know.”

“Good talent. Wasted on these brutes. You could be a doctor in the Capital,” he says sourly as he looks out the window of the carriage to the left. I follow his gaze to the row of gladiators being marched out of the compound. Khan is in the middle, his arms tightly bound, the collar around his neck, arms and feet, so he can barely shuffle. My mind races—the other gladiators are unarmed, but except for the two half-orc warriors, the other seven warriors are unrestrained. There are four guards marching them towards the stables, two with crossbows, the other two with swords.

The gladiators are loyal to Khan. They respect him. Could he convince them to try to get the keys from the guard, to overpower them?

I glance up to the ramparts of the estate, where men with crossbows are leaning out, watching the gladiators carefully, and I get the image of Khan being struck by bolts, falling to the ground, and I stare down at the floor.

The gates are opened, and we drive out onto the main road that I was taken up on

what feels like a lifetime ago, shackled to the orc who terrified me. Now I wish I was by his side.

“Pitmaster, may I ask a question?” I keep my voice deferential. He nods.

“What are the odds for Ethan and Felix’s fight?” I keep thinking to the pale-faced Felix, bent over on his bed, praying to any God that will listen.

One of the guards snorts derisively, and I wish I didn’t ask.

“One in ninety. Few bet on these fights,” says Shug, as if he is rattling off the price of wheat.

“I’ve got three bronze pieces on Grommash killing them in under a minute,” says one of the guards, grinning. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, and it only makes him smile more as he toys with me.

“And Khan? What are the odds of him against Thrukarr?”

“The betting line is at four to one. Quite a bit of action on this fight,” says Shug, his brown eyes watching me intently. “Khan’s odds are always high. He’s fought orcs a dozen times. Half-orcs twice that.”

“I’m more excited for the show,” says the grinning guard, and he looks me down, in a predatory way that makes me feel like he can see through my heavy apron and clothes.

I move myself farther away from him, my body pressed against the wall of the carriage, and look out the window at the rolling fields, but his comment festers in my mind. “The show?” I ask, finally.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Shug says, blandly, and the sadistic guard chuckles under his breath.

I pat the leather satchel. It always reassures me to have my tools, even if there’s no surgeon’s knife or scissors entrusted to me. I’m sure I’ll get them at the arena.

Soon, the formidable grey walls of Corwinhold loom in front of us. “Shut the window,” says the other guard to me, and I close them as the air foulds, the smoke of the city a constant blanket. The sounds of gears grinding and anvils clanging makes me long for my peaceful village. The driver coughs dryly from outside, with no protection from the smog that oppresses the lives of all who earn their living in the factory city.

The two guards talk about the upcoming fights, and I tune them out.

“What are the facilities like for us?” I ask the doctor.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Busy. Not all pitmasters have their own doctors, and the general staff are real butchers. I was working in the Capital, you know. I was doing real work there.”

“You lost your license for drinking on the job,” says one of the guards, laughing. The doctor grimaces.

The sound of the wheels changes, clunking along over cobblestones, and I can hear the sounds of the city, people on the streets selling food and drink, calling out their wares, sometimes interrupted by a racking, dry cough that afflicts the villagers who go to work here for the higher wages.

The timber of voices changes, and we stop, the side door opened from the outside by the driver. We are in a transportation hub, hay on the floor, other wagons piled in. I walk out, and three gladiators in a prison wagon whistle at me.

“This way,” says the white-haired doctor, as I scan my surroundings. The transportation hub leads out into the street, the air foul, but on the other side it is against the wall of the arena, where barred doors lead inside. It must be where the gladiators sit while they wait to be taken home, and there’s only a few guards, bored, sitting on wooden chairs and watching over multiple wagons.

This would be the most chaotic place to try to escape...but then you’d have to get through the streets, and past the walls of the city itself.

I follow the doctor through a door down a hallway, until we get to a low-ceilinged room, claustrophobic but lit up with even light by long, glass tubes that somehow illuminate the area with some royal technology. Empty beds line the walls, neatly

arranged and waiting for injured combatants, doctors and nurses chatting idly with each other. For them, it's just another day at work. The beds on the left side are twice the size of the others, made for the orcish species.

At least one of those beds will be filled today.

On the far wall, all the tools I could need are hung up. Shared implements, and there are barrels from which a chemical stink is emanating, and I realize that their sanitization method must be simply dipping the tools in the barrel and using them on the next gladiator.

The white-haired doctor makes a beeline for a young nurse who's arranging bottles of medicine on a table, and she winces visibly as he approaches, obviously trying his luck constantly with her.

"Hey, you working for Shug?" asks a tall doctor with jet-black hair. He's young, around my age, and he's got a cocky smile that says he knows exactly how handsome he is. If this was a week ago, I'd have been nervous around him. He's just got that self-assured look—but now, I can only picture how tiny he would look standing next to Khan.

I nod.

"You any good? I hate working with Cordell. He's an absolute butcher." He's got a posh accent, sounding like he came from the Capital, and I'm surprised to see him in this pit.

"I'll do my best."

He extends his hand. "James. I'll be working a practice up north next month. The head doctor likes his trainees to put some time in the pits. You learn more here in a

week than in four years of medical school.”

“Maya,” I say.

“It’s quiet now, but in about an hour, it’s going to be chaos. Feel free to yell for me if you need any help.” There’s a subtle difference in the way he speaks to me that takes me a second to pick up on. It’s not his boasting flirting. It’s that he doesn’t know I am a slave, and he speaks to me like a human, where Shug’s guards treat me like an object.

“Thank you,” I say, mentally steeling myself for what is to come.

19

MAYA

“Get me a fresh stack of bandages,” I say in a hard tone over the screams of grievously wounded men. Cordell rushes to replenish my supplies. I took over when I saw him try to pour an herbal mixture used to treat insomnia into Tanner’s deeply cut chest. He was the gladiator who called Garvin an executioner, and I packed his bleeding wound up with anti-infectious herbs and bandages, stemming the bleeding, all while he gritted his teeth against the pain.

I glance out at the hallway, and my stomach sinks. On a stretcher, Felix’s corpse is barely recognizable, his head split nearly in two. Cordell returns with what I asked for.

“Where do they take the bodies?”

“Down to transport hub, a wagon brings them back to the—oh, shit,” says Cordell, looking out at the hallway.

A second stretcher is being walked towards the morgue. Ethan. His chest is caved in, and he is laying back, motionless, but he makes eye contact with me and mouths the word please.

“He’s still alive!” I yell, rushing into the hallway.

“He’s a goner,” grunts one of the men carrying him, in an annoyed tone of voice. I point to the medical bay, and he’s diverted and dumped unceremoniously on one of the beds.

“Put pressure on his arm,” I say to Cordell. He grabs the wet, bleeding arm awkwardly, and I get a wave of fetid alcohol breath from him. In the last hour, he’s managed to go from sober to dead drunk, and I didn’t even see him drinking. His hand slips off Ethan’s arm and blood spurts out.

“James!” I yell, and the handsome young doctor is there in a flash, pushing aside Cordell and applying pressure as I analyze the wound. Ethan’s chest is indented and cut from a huge swing of a battle-axe. There’s no time to clean it. I splash anti-bacterial, and I’m about to wrap it, when he wheezes painfully, unable to breathe.

I reach down for the metal tube and without hesitation plunge it into his throat. His breath whistles through the tube, and he looks shocked but grateful, able to breathe again. James is already tightening a bandage around his arm, but the situation is stabilized.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Cordell, I need blue lotus root.”

“I can’t give you that, it’s for valuable gladiators—”

I give him a venomous look, and with my other hand, I grab a surgeon’s knife. He clears his throat, nervous, and reaches into his pocket, bringing out the only thing I know that will give Ethan a chance to survive. His chest is caved in, and it will be months of recovery, but his body will have the chance to regrow. I pack his wound full of the plant while Cordell moans and complains about wastage, then bandage him up. His life is going to be agony for the next months, but he will have a chance. Ethan passes out from pain and exhaustion, which is for the best.

“Open his mouth,” I say to James, and he does so, and I go through the painstaking process of clearing his throat so he will be able to breathe again, when there’s a dark presence at the door.

I look up. Two of Shug’s guards are there.

“Maya. Come with us.”

“I’m in the middle of—”

He reaches to his sword threateningly.

“Can you finish this?” I ask James.

He looks to the guards, then to me. “Yeah. Sure.”

I grab a towel, cleaning my hands, and go to the entrance of the medical bay. “What’s going on? Khan’s fighting next, I need to stay focused.”

“Oh, you’ll see Khan fighting,” grins the guard who leered at me in the wagon. “Take that bloody apron off.”

“Why?”

“I told you I was excited for the show. You better hope your boyfriend wins,” he grins, and grabs my arm firmly, dragging me forward. I stumble along, trying to fight out of his grip, but he’s too big, and I’m pulled towards the fighters’ entrance. Khan is shackled by the portcullis gates, and his eyes widen as I am dragged past him and into the arena.

“No! Bring her back!” His yell is agony as he fights against his chains, every muscle in his body bulging, but I am pulled into the sands of the fighting pits.

The gladiator ring is huge, a sand-filled arena, packed stands filled with a mass of humanity. The sun is a hazy white dot against the smog, which is held at bay by some sort of air-field generated, and I am pulled into the center, while the crowd stares down at me.

From the opposite side of the ring, portcullis gates stop the huge, hulking opponent of an orc, with a massive belly and light leather armor, a huge battle-axe on the ground in front of him.

At the seat of honor, in a raised section away from the crowd, I recognize Lord Corwin’s heir, not yet twenty, a skinny brat of a boy who is looking down at me with an eager smile plastered on his face, guards looming behind him. Shug is sitting near him in the VIP section, next to Alf, who is wearing a finely tailored purple cloak secured with a golden brooch.

“What are you doing to me?” I gasp out, terror gripping.

“Corwin’s boy’s a real pervert,” grins the sadistic guard. “Early twentieth birthday present for him.”

“Watch your fucking tongue with that, you want us both killed?” hisses the other.

“No one can hear us. And no one would believe this slave bitch anyways.” He tightens his grip around my wrist. I look back at Khan. He’s pulling against his chains, and I know the shackles are digging into his flesh as he fights to get to me.

The arena ring has four portcullis gates, and from under the seat of honor, the gate slowly rises, and four burly guards drag in a horrific torture device. It’s a wooden table, with four shackles, meant to keep a victim in place.

“A little twist Alf does to draw in an audience. People like to see if the woman can survive the victor after,” says the sadist, his grip so tight he’s hurting me.

I look over at the huge orc on the other side of the arena. He’s pacing, hungry for the fight.

The wooden table is brought into the middle of the ring, and I’m lifted up onto it, my legs and arms shackled, my legs forced open by the cruel metal clasps, and instead of fear, all I’m filled with is hatred, hatred for Corwin’s heir, for the guards, for Shug and the pitmaster, hating every person who fills the crowd to watch bloodshed.

My clothes are ripped from my body, and I am exposed in front of the crowd, but the wolf whistles and jeers only make me more determined, my fear disappearing in the wave of hatred.

The two orcs are unshackled, and Thrukarr stalks forward. Khan stays near the wall,

sidling right, drawing his opponent to him, so that the fight will be far from me. He's moving easily, his limp gone, and he grips his sword tight in his hand, staring down his foe. His features are emotionless, his body pure death, the black runic tattoos glowing against his jade body, his eyes two burning emeralds that fix on his enemy's every movement.

Thrukarr charges, swinging his axe backwards, and I see the point of Khan's huge sword extend out of his back, as Khan lifts him in the air by his blade, driving forward to meet his charge, impaling him. It's over before it could begin, the crowd deathly silent as Khan drops him to the ground.

There is no coup de gras, no formal execution. Khan pulls his sword back and Thrukarr's heart's blood pumps out. Khan's giant foe is dispatched, the mighty beast of an orc felled. Khan takes his bloody sword, snarling as he strides to me, and brings it up in the air to break my bonds.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Khan, wait,” I whisper, and his sword stays, as the crowd watches intently, not knowing if he’s about to kill me.

“I will no longer be a puppet for them,” he growls, and I glance up, trying to check the reactions of the pitmaster, to see if they heard. Khan is looking down at me, his emerald eyes filled with pain, and if he doesn’t fuck me in front of the crowd, he’s going to be executed for disobeying.

He stares down at my naked body, my legs outstretched, my virgin slit exposed, and the crowd disappears as I focus on every inch of his brutal strength, and the feverish need infects me, washing over me. His nostrils flare, and he tastes my need, confused. I let it wash over me. I don’t fight it. I picture his huge, jade-colored cock stretching me out as I am trapped, unable to escape, and my nipples harden, my body sensitive and begging for his touch.

It’s the only thing I can do to get us out of here alive. Men are killed for less defiance.

“They don’t even exist,” I say, my voice barely a whisper, and he drops his sword to the ground. His cock is surging up, uncontrollably, his body reacting to my need. He undoes his loincloth, and it drops to the ground, and I can hear gasps from the crowd, shocked at his sheer size as his monstrous member rears up to its full length, already dripping creamy white pre-cum.

He steps forward, closer to me, and I focus on his emerald eyes, his broad, honest features, the sheer strength of his being, and I know I was meant to be his. “Take me,” I say, inviting him, giving him permission to lose control, to let the beastly rage that has been barely held back focus entirely on me.

He rests his cock against my virgin slit, and each throb of his cock makes my body answer with a pulse of desire. I pull against the shackles, wanting to run my hands over his muscled body, wanting to grab him and pull him closer. His huge hands grip my inner thighs, pressing me open further, and I can't stop staring at his thick cock as he grinds into me in an agonizingly slow thrust. His pre-cum seems to soothe me, as if it is designed for his species to be able to breed with too-small humans, and I gasp in pain and pleasure as he plunges into me, so steel-hard that my body cannot resist. There's a flash of pain as he tears through my innocence, binding me to him for eternity, then his cock pulses again, splashing my inner pussy walls with his orcish pre-cum, and the pain recedes, until only the too-intense, stretching pleasure remains.

Khan's eyes widen, blazing with feral hunger as he groans in pleasure, thrusting deeper and deeper into me, then he pulls back, leaving me feeling so empty, only the tip of his cock stretching me open, before he thrusts into me, brutally hard, his huge dick stretching me apart as he loses control, growling like a beast as he grips my legs tight and fucks me like a beast. The pleasure is deep and intense, and I melt under his dominance. He is relentless, hammering me in hard thrusts, and when I stare down I can see my inner pussy lips gripping onto his cock, stretched beyond belief, each thrust sending a new wave of sensation coursing through me.

He snarls like a wild animal, his hands leaving red marks on my legs as I give myself to him completely, surrendering to the blissful, too-intense ecstasy of being mated by the brutal warrior.

My orgasm is forced out of me, my pussy clenching against his massive dick as I am desperate for his seed, aching for it more than air, and he roars, his intense eyes staring straight into mine as he unleashes inside me.

He pulls back, his cock slowly softening, slick with his cum and tinged pink from my innocence, staring down at me possessively, but his eyes flash with rage as he glances up at the crowd, sharing the same hatred as me for the bloodthirsty crowd.

He tears himself from me, stomping out of the arena and through the portcullis gate, as his seed drips from my stretched pussy, and I lay back, exhausted.

All of the eyes on me are meaningless. All their jeers and whistles do not touch me, background noise.

I will be free of this place, by Khan's side.

20

KHAN

I storm down the hallway, ignoring the other gladiators who greet us after the fight, rushing to my bedroom, my nostrils flaring as I desperately search for her scent. I pray to the Gods who forsook me that Shug brought her back here, and hasn't imprisoned her deeper in the estate.

To my relief, she is there, laying on the bed, changed into an ill-fitting peasant's dress. She's laying back on the bed, and when I burst in, she gets up, rushing to me, and I wrap her up in my arms. I hold her tight against my body, not speaking, breathing in her scent, because I feared that Shug would take her from me, lock her up in his estate.

I hold her for long minutes, running my hands through her hair, when finally, she pulls herself from my arms.

"Khan, who are you fighting next?"

"A human fighter. Strong, but he doesn't have a chance. Why?"

She bites her lip. "I...I've got a bad feeling about it. I don't know why."

“Nothing will happen to me. I’ve survived worse.”

She slumps down on the bed, the rage I saw in her when she was restrained to the wooden table evaporated. “How are we going to get out of here? He’s got guards everywhere. I tried...I looked for a way out. There’s none. He’ll know soon that I did something to your seed when those three women don’t get pregnant, he’ll know, and he’ll...I don’t know what he’ll do, but it’s going to be bad. He told me I won’t be free until they’re pregnant with your sons. And we can’t let that happen, Khan. We can’t.”

I feel so powerless. All my strength, all my will, and I cannot soothe her anxious worry. I don’t want to just tell her it’s going to be alright. I don’t want to tell her I can get her out of here, because that is just words.

I close the door behind me and sit at my chair, my mind racing. “One man would get cut down by crossbow bolts trying to escape. But not all of us. I can rally the gladiators. The walls are tall, but with the half-orcs lifting men...”

“He’s expecting that. He knows we could try. It’s too risky.”

I grab the side of my table, impotent frustration filling me.

Her brows furrow as she thinks. “I think he’s going to sell his stable to that new pitmaster. Alf. I think he wants to get out of the gladiator trade.”

“Why do you think that?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“He said something. About how his portfolio would be worth more with a competent doctor. He let it slip.” She bites her lip. “Maybe Alf has less security? I want to get out of here quickly, but I don’t want to rush things in some foolish escape attempt. I was just...that crowd made me so angry. It’s like we’re just playthings for them.”

I run my tongue over my fangs. “There’s many gladiators who feel that way. They pit us against each other. If we all rose up at once, we could burn the city down. But we couldn’t hold it.”

She lies back against the bed. “Do you think there’s any chance Shug will let me free? It would be easier for you to escape without me weighing me down...”

“No. Not with my seed in your belly.” I get up and sit down on the bed beside her, running my hand over her stomach. “I don’t know how I know, but I just know.”

“I’m scared, Khan. I’m scared that the rest of my life, I’m going to be trapped here, that I’m going to have a child born into captivity...and I’m scared that something awful is going to happen in a week, the next time you enter the arena.”

I lay down on the bed, resting my head in her lap, and she runs her hands over my neck, kneading my muscles, the burgeoning headache fading away before it can develop into a full migraine. Her hands soothe me, but I needed her to have something to focus on.

She takes in a deep breath. “I should go see if anyone needs treatment after the fights. Felix...he didn’t make it, but I think Ethan survived.”

I'd watched Ethan get cut down, an axe through his chest. "I saw him killed in the arena."

"They thought he was dead. They were bringing him down to the morgue, but I did what I could."

I pull myself up, and she rubs her temples. "Gods, but I'd love a bath."

"Take one. The survivors weren't grievously injured. Scrapes and bumps."

"Still. If I can help, I have to."

That's why I love you.

The thought hits me, and I blink, knowing it's true. She limps to the doorway. "Are you hurt?"

She looks back, a little embarrassed. "No, you're just...you're really big."

"I hurt you?"

"No, I'm okay, just really sore. I took some stillroot, I'll be okay. Hey, don't look like that. I loved it. All those people watching...they didn't mean anything. It was just you and me in there."

Fuck, but she's a strong will, never bowing or breaking under the immense pressure. She was snatched up from her life and thrown into this, and she never gives up.

"Just find out what you can about the next fights, okay?" She leaves the room, and I pull myself up. My leg is still grinding in pain, but it's nothing compared to a few days ago. Her concoctions work magic.

I sit there, thinking, when there's a knock at the door. "Come in," I say, and some of the novice gladiators with only a few matches under their belts bring in the buckets of boiling water I always take after a fight, filling the bathtub. I stare at the little divot in the bed where she was sitting, smelling her scent, wishing the answer would come to me.

I wash myself, and she comes back in, stripping off her clothes and going into the bath I just vacated, sinking into the waters gratefully. She's too tired to say anything, closing her eyes and sighing in the water. I pull on trousers and a tunic, give her a kiss on the forehead, and make my way to the mess hall, where the scent of fish stew makes my stomach grumble.

"It's bony as hell," says Garvin, by way of greeting, sitting at the long wooden table with a bowl of stew. Men make way for me, and I get a bowl of my own and sit across from him. The conversation stops, gladiators giving me side-glances. I don't eat with the others often, and after what happened today in the arena, none of them want to get on my bad side.

I take a bite of soup, the bones crunching in my mouth. Pink fish. I'm always grateful for sustenance, but I have to force myself to eat, knowing it is the leftovers from the estate. That never grated me before. I never felt trapped. I chose my fate, to be here, to endure until I met my end in battle.

"Do you know who I fight next?" Garvin always has his pulse on the fights.

He winces. "I didn't know what would happen today."

"I didn't say you did."

"You're up against a crowd favorite. Little lord Lucian loves him. Three wins under his belt, one against a half-orc. Lorenzo Dusk."

“Dusk. That name sounds familiar.”

“He was a minor lord. Stopped paying taxes to the overlord of his county, saying that he was plotting some action against the king, I don’t know what. Maybe bullshit, but the people love a story like that. Shame it’ll end so quick. For him, at least. You could probably earn some favor sparing his life, if you can avoid a killing blow.”

I grunt in thanks and focus on my meal.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“That was an incredible fight today,” says a young gladiator, and everyone at the table tries to pretend not to look over to see my reaction, but no one eats another bite.

I say nothing, giving him a little nod to relieve the pressure, and lift my bowl and down it, and fill another to take to Maya. I avoid making eye contact with the other fighters, just wanting to be alone with her as I exit the mess hall and go down the hallway to our room. At her side is the only place I feel any semblance of peace. She’s sitting at the little kitchen table, deep in thought, and I put the bowl of food down in front of her.

She sniffs at the bowl.

“What’s wrong?”

“I saw Shug eating this same fish when I met with him.”

“Our dinners are stews made of his estates leftovers.”

“I guess beggars can’t be choosers,” she says, and she’s perked up a little, her scent no longer with the icy tension. “Did you find anything out?”

I pull the chair closer to the bathtub. “Something does seem off about it. They put me up against some disgraced lord. The fans love him.”

“Lorenzo Dusk?”

“You know him?”

“Yeah, even in my little village people were talking about him. Anyone who supports the king loves him. He’s handsome, too. Used to be known as someone who would challenge other lords for duels over every little perceived slight.”

“Handsome, huh?”

She smiles. I love that smile. “Not as handsome as you, don’t worry.”

I lay back in bed, and she dries herself and joins me, and I hold her tight against me, loving the feeling of her soft skin against mine.

I’ve got my entire future in my arms.

21

MAYA

There’s a nervous knock at the door, and I blink awake in Khan’s arms, surprised to see the morning sunlight seeping through the window. Khan was always an early riser, even with the concoction I gave him last night, which is working wonders for his old injuries.

Khan leaps out of bed, striding to the door naked, and opens it. On the other side is Peter.

“Why do you disturb my rest?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what this is, but a guard told me to bring you this,” he says, holding out one of the dried, brown leaves. Khan takes it, closing the door.

“What is this?”

I take it from him. “It reacts to the saliva of a pregnant woman.” I rest it on my tongue, but the moment I open my mouth to take it out, I already know the answer from the way Khan is staring at it.

I can’t speak. I hold the leaf up. It’s changed subtly, turned a dull green, and I don’t know what to feel. A million emotions come crashing down on me. Khan isn’t surprised. He knew last night, somehow already, but until this moment I was torn, not sure what to want, and now the walls close in on me.

Khan takes the leaf and opens the door, handing it to Peter. I could have refused to do the test, but I know, deep down, that if it came back unchanged, Shug would drag me up to the estate and make me do it again in front of him.

Khan closes the door, and turns, standing in front of me, his huge bulk towering over me. He takes my hand and presses it against the middle of his chest, where there is a rune in the shape of a stylized mountain in black ink.

“I got this rune at fourteen. I was berry picking with some of the other children, and a grizzly charged in to try to snatch one of the youngest. I fended him off, and I got my first marking. This rune mocked me every day for the last eight years. It says that I am a protector.”

“You are,” I say, feeling his strength bolstering me.

“I won’t let anything happen to our son.”

“How do you know he’s a boy?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“I just know.” He takes in a huge breath. “And I know that Shug will not let you free, not until that boy is born.”

“I can’t have a baby here. I can’t, I can’t, I—” I try to be strong, but the emotions crash down on me, this wave of sadness and the little embers of poisonous hope, beauty and tragedy mixing together in a way that makes my knees weak. I collapse, but he’s there to catch me, holding me against his muscled body, running his hands through my hair, squeezing me against his broad chest. He is unshakable, a foundation to build a future on, but we’re caged together, and I don’t see a way out.

When my tears are all gone, he pulls me onto the bed beside him, and I lean against his shoulder, staring at the walls.

“We act as if nothing has changed. I will rally the men. They will do as I say.”

“What are you planning, Khan?”

“I’m planning to break out.”

“He’s tripled the guards.”

“Nothing can prepare him for what I will do.”

I wish his words calmed me, but all I can picture is the crossbow bolts thudding into his flesh, dropping him as he scales the walls.

“There’s no other choice, Maya. I will not have my son born into captivity. I will not

have my woman caged.”

The knock comes at the door again, the same, hesitant one that belongs to Peter.

“What it is?” barks out Khan.

“Shug. He wants to see you, Khan.”

I exchange a glance with him. I need him here with me, right now, more than anything.

He stands up, puts a cloak over his body, and leaves without a word.

There’s nothing to say.

22

KHAN

As I am marched towards the estate, I take stock of the guards. Newcomers, bolstering his forces, armed with crossbows and blades, five for each one there was a week ago. The entire grounds are swarming with men, and each one is a knife digging into me.

I steel myself as I shuffle along, three guards behind me, two in front, crossbows aimed at me, and I know there that my plan is doomed to fail and that I have no other choice.

How many of the gladiators can I rally? They will balk. They can see the odds as plainly as I can. It’s more likely one of the newcomers would betray me to Shug than they would take up arms to fight by my side. I could rally them with fear. Killing

dissenters. My mind is racing for every possibility, no matter how dire, but the hopelessness is creeping into my being.

It rankles me that these worms of men, these short, stubby little creatures, can shackle me, march me up to the vast estates. Each step burns me, the tight cuffs biting into my skin as I am forced into the entrance hall of his manor. I look up the stairs to the balcony where Shug meets with his pitfighters.

“No. This way,” grunts one of the guards, cocking his head towards a hallway. I follow, the other guards pointing their crossbows at me from all angles. I can smell their fear, and even with me bound tightly, their hands shake. One twitch of their fingers and those bolts will drive through my heart.

One of the guards pulls open a wooden trap door, revealing a winding staircase. He goes down first, glancing up to make sure I follow, and I am forced down the staircase into the cool dankness of the underbelly of Shug’s estate. Flickering torches make the shadows dance, and a wooden door is unlocked to a room with nothing but a chair and an iron-barred cage. My pulse quickens. Is Shug planning to put me in that cage and transport me somewhere, far from Maya? I lick my fangs. The soldier is unlocking the cage, and I can see it in my mind, diving forward, ripping his neck open, crunching my teeth down and severing his spine...

I could kill one. Two. Maybe three of them, before the bolts end me.

With my hands bound, I can do nothing but enter, forced to duck my head, and the guards lock the cage, unshackle me, and leave. The bars are against my hunched head, and I can do nothing but wait.

The wooden door opens. Shug comes in, alone, pulling the chair to the other side of the room and sitting across from me. The torches flicker, and we both watch each other, each trying to get into the other’s mind.

“Why did you bring me here.” I break the silence, my voice growling, filled with hate. For what he did to Maya, forcing her bound in the arena, I will end him.

“Your next match is an important one, Khan.”

My right leg twinges in pain. I shift my weight, but keep standing, wishing I had the strength to bend the bars of the cage, so that I could be on him. I would taste his blood, listen to his heartbeat pounding in panic then stop forever. I grip the metal bars tight, my forearms flexing beyond my control, my knuckles white as I squeeze, wishing the bar was his throat.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

“Your next fight is on the lord Lucian’s twentieth birthday. The greatest games Corwinhold has seen.” He taps his fingers against the wooden armrest of the chair. “Your opponent, Lorenzo Dusk, is Lucian’s favored champion.”

My eyes narrow.

“You are going to lose, Khan. You are going to put up a fight, and Lorenzo is going to get a lucky hit, and then another, and the great champion of the ring will meet his end.”

My heart thumps, hard, the pressure in my temples unbearable as the migraine shoots lightning pain through my skull. All I can focus on is Shug, hate filling my being.

“You failed your tribe, Khan. They died, and you lived. Don’t make the same mistake again. You care for this woman...Maya. Do as I say, and she will have a good life. Once she bears your child, she will be freed. But if you do not do as I say, you will never see her again. She will bear a child, and then she will be thrown to the wolves.”

The roar comes from deep in my soul, rage and pain screaming out of me. Spit flies, my fangs bared, and Shug jolts backwards, the chair flipping over as he falls, heavily. He dusts himself off, scowling, and pulls himself up, righting the chair. “I know what you planned, Khan. Some last-ditch escape attempt, some rebellion. But it won’t work. And when you fail, the rest of her life will be a nightmare. Don’t risk it. I’ve always been fair. You know I will honor this deal.”

He reaches into his cloak and pulls out a long glass tube. “You will be freed to her once you fill this. A token of my good faith to let you spend your last days with

her—or you can rot here, in this cage, until it is time for you to die.” He rolls the tube on the floor, and it stops an inch in front of the bars. “Bang on the bars when you’re ready. My men will bring you to her.”

He gets up, watching me carefully, and leaves me alone in the room.

I grab the tube, wanting to grip it so tight it shatters, but if I don’t do as he says, the next step will be threatening her.

I have no choice.

23

MAYA

“Step back!” the guard barks, his voice echoing against the cold stone walls of the gladiator quarters as he opens the metal barred door. I retreat as Khan is brought in, and he steps back against the bars, letting the guard undo his shackles one by one.

He seems to have aged a decade in the hour he was away. His posture is slumped, weariness etched into every line of his face.

As the cuffs come off, I rush to him, concern clawing at my chest. “What happened out there, Khan?” I run my hand over his cheek, but it’s like he doesn’t feel my touch.

Wordlessly, he strides past me, a vacant look in his green eyes, and settles into his room, sitting down heavily on the bed instead of joining the other gladiators in their training. It’s his eyes that terrify me. They don’t have the fire they usually carry, and he stares straight forward at the wall as if I do not exist.

“What did he do to you?” I press, as gently as I can.

Khan shakes his head, weariness weighing down his voice. "Nothing."

"What did he want?"

Khan gaze flicks up to meet mine, his green eyes glazed. "He told me that he knows I plan a rebellion. He's a step ahead of me, always."

I sit next to him on the bed, gliding my fingers over his muscular arm as I search his face for answers. "Khan, we can adapt. We're in this together. Shug is selling his stable to Alf; we have time to plan. He'll buy me as well. I have value as a doctor. Even if we can't escape now, it doesn't mean we're trapped forever."

He slowly turns his gaze to me, his expression unreadable. "From everyone else, I don't mind being called Khan. I told myself the person I was died when I couldn't protect my tribe." His voice is heavy with emotion.

His black brows furrow, and I stroke his arm, trying to reassure him. He is so tense it's like his body is a frozen lake barely contained by a thousand tiny cracks. I keep silent, terrified to say the wrong word, terrified I'll shatter him. "My given name is Montarok. I promised myself I would die without hearing that name again."

"Montarok," I say. "It suits you."

A melancholic smile flickers on his lips. "Mountain of protection. That's what it means in our tongue."

"You're my mountain." I murmur, clutching his massive arm. He's got muscles like boulders, this inhumanly powerful beast of a man.

"That, I can be. If I can be one thing with my life, it will be your shield."

“Montarok,” I say, tasting the name. “Don’t talk like this. You’re more than just some shield. You’re my foundation. And I promise you, we will get out of this, together. That new pitmaster, Alf, he can put on a show, but he isn’t as cunning as Shug.”

“He turned us into a circus sideshow,” he snarls, his arms tensing up in rage.

I stand up in front of him. He’s near as tall as me even sitting, and I run my finger under his chin, pressing his gaze upwards, until his burning green eyes are staring into mine. “I’m glad for that. Because now I’ve got your son growing inside me. This isn’t the end. This is just the beginning.” I lean forward and kiss him on his brow. I run my hands over his neck, feeling his tension, and I work at the knots, knowing he must have an awful headache.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

He stands, so suddenly I am almost bowled over, forcing me to step back. His fists are clenched, his muscles knotted and flexed. “There will be a day of bloodshed to mark the little lord’s birthday. I owe it to the men to make sure as many as possible survive,” he says, and barges out of the door, his knuckles white as if around his blade, as he stalks towards the training arenas, leaving me alone and confused.

I walk to the window, staring out through the bars, to the walls where the estate looms over. Shug. The puppetmaster, who has been playing us since we arrived here.

I need to think, and so I add a piece of wood to the embers of the fire, and put the kettle on, making the black tea that Khan—no, Montarok brought me. When I’ve got a cup, I sit back, swirling it, biting my lip. There’s something different about Montarok. Something deeper than just having Shug tell him he’s a step ahead. We knew with the extra guards that he was preparing for an escape attempt. There’s no new information, no reason that his shoulders would be slumped, this deep fatigue mixed with a strange surge of determination.

When I finish the cup, I pull myself up. Being idle is the worst thing I could do for myself right now, and there’s plenty of work to do. As much as I hate Shug, he gave me everything I need to set up my hospital. He might only care if the gladiators live or die because of how much money he makes off them, but he knows a good investment when he sees it. I’ve got herbs to grind, poultices to mix, and potions to brew.

I keep expecting Montarok to come see me at lunch. Instead, he walks out of the ring and must have gone straight to the mess hall to dine with the others, not even saying hi to me.

So he needs some time alone.

I wish he was here, to reassure me, but I'll respect it as much as I can. When I've worked until the afternoon, two new stretchers cobbled together from blunted spears, medicines mixed, and my progress on the hospital enough to satisfy me, I grow weary and retire to our little room.

I brew myself another cup of tea, trying to work things out, wishing I could fit all the pieces of the puzzle together. I'm missing something—or the man I thought I could trust is holding it back.

As the sun is setting, he limps back to the bedroom. I've prepared him a brew to ease his wounds, and he downs it in a single gulp, then, without bathing, stumbles into bed.

"I would hold you," he says, and I crawl into bed with him, letting him wrap me up in his huge arms, looking up at his stony, powerful features as he closes his eyes, deep in thought. He looks so strong, like nothing could ever hurt him, and yet I sense a deep wound in him.

I want to press him for details, probe him for what happened, but I can't disturb the first time he has a semblance of peace, so I just run my hand against his huge chest, and he squeezes me tighter against him.

Montarok breathes in my scent as I cuddle against him, his nostrils flaring as his cock stirs against me. I turn, my hand on his huge thigh for support, and look up into his eyes. I'm met with a darkness I've never seen before, the flickering light of the lamp casting strange shadows on his hard, stony features. He looks like a stranger, and his body tenses as his lust grows. He leans in, his breath hot against my neck, and he kisses my tender skin, fangs grazing against my artery. His cock is pulsing and growing against his loincloth, and despite the anxiety that's living in me, my body is

helpless, responding in kind. I cannot stop the primal yearning I have for him, how deeply I crave the endless surrender to the alpha's strength.

He pulls my clothes off furiously, needing our bodies to be naked together, and throws his loincloth aside, pulling me closer to him as he sits up, his chest a wall of hard green muscle as his cock rears up, throbbing hungrily. His alien pre-cum drips down the jade shaft, coating it in his pearly seed, slick and designed to let me take every inch of that too-huge thing inside of me, and as it throbs, my pussy tingles and clenches, and I feel so empty, so alone. I pull myself up and he cups his huge hands under my naked ass, positioning my slit on his throbbing, spurting cockhead as I wrap my legs around him. He slowly lowers me down onto his shaft, and I moan in pleasure and need as I am impaled, the huge head stretching me open as I sink into the oblivion of lust, knowing nothing but his body and mine, my tension erasing as he takes me.

We grind our bodies together in rhythm, our arms wrapped around each other, squeezing each other tight. He's so deep inside me, this slow, gradual pleasure building in me like icemelt against a dam, building and building as I run my tongue over his sweaty chest, licking over his nipple, kissing his neck as he groans in pleasure. "Montarok," I gasp, and he kisses me, his tongue swirling in mind as our bodies writh in unison, my orgasm welling over me, pleasure washing over my being as I shudder, my pussy clenching against his massive cock, until with a low, deep groan, he cums in me, each throb of his cock sending waves of his orcish seed deep inside me.

As my orgasm fades and the warm, golden afterglow fills me, there's a thread of worry that grows anew, this horrible sensation that tonight could be one of the last nights we have together.

Without a word, he runs his hands through my hair, gently, tenderly, like he is scared he will break me, then shifts to his side, his softening cock still inside me as we lay in

each other's arms in bed. He is a titan, a god of war in the flesh, and yet as the flickering light washes over his features, his deep sorrow infects me.

He pulls my head to his chest, so that I am protected from the light, and I let my exhaustion take me until I am lost in a fitful sleep.

24

KHAN

I get up before dawn. My leg is loose, the throbbing in my temples lessened from her ointments and brews, but I'd take the agony of the clubs slamming against my knee again over what I am feeling now.

As I pull myself gently from her arms, I look down at her. She's breathing shallowly in her sleep, shifting like she can't get comfortable. All I want to do is hold her tight and soothe her...

But soon, I will be gone, and I will never hold her again. Being in her presence is agony. There's a dull thumping from the training grounds, and I pull myself away, gritting my teeth and leaving the room, closing the door behind me softly.

This is what I wanted.

To fight in the ring, until my life was taken from me, to die as I should have with my tribe. I no longer care what I deserve. I know what I want, what I need, and the only thing that makes me want to draw another breath is the thought of a future with her.

It hits me, all at once, and I understand the wrath of the Gods.

I did not deserve only to die. I deserved torment. They waited to let the adders bite

when I had something to lose.

My fist clenches, tight. She is so powerful. So intelligent, with such an unflappable, deep strength to her. She would never have given up on life like I did, and she is the only woman in the world I could imagine as my mate, raising my son. She will have to raise him without me, but I know, deep down, that it will not be in captivity forever.

One day, she will find a way to break free of this place.

But gnawing guilt grips me as I remember filling the tube with my seed. There will be more life flowing from me, life born into captivity, life I have damned to live like mine, unless I can stop the forced impregnation of those three women before it's too late.

I had no choice. Shug would have taken her hands off first, that I know.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

I enter the armory, grabbing my practice sword, and take it to the training grounds. To my surprise, Garvin is already there, circling a training dummy with his wooden blade, swinging with the quick intensity that made him a feared champion in his prime. His brow is covered in sweat as he moves with lithe grace, ducking and stabbing, pulling back before an enemy could strike him back.

That is how Lorenzo Dusk will move. I am told he was an excellent duelist even before the ring, a man who would face any challenger.

“Khan,” he says, when he sees me enter the arena. He takes a break, driving his sword into the sand and standing with his fingers linked behind his head, his chest heaving with exertion.

“You’re fighting?” I haven’t seen him train this hard in a decade.

He shakes his head. “No. Just another execution.”

“Why do you train?”

He glances up at the walls, where two crossbowmen are walking the ramparts. “I’ve got a feeling I’m going to need my blade soon.”

I shake my head. “No. There will be no escape.”

His brows furrow. “Don’t fuck with me, Khan. I’ve known you a long time. You’re planning something.” He spits on the sand, then glances up at me, eyes narrowed.

“I need your help. With something else.”

“Whatever you need.”

I look up, at the first light of dawn spreading the promise of a new day. “My next fight will be my last.”

“Bullshit. The odds are 12 to 1 on you beating Lorenzo.”

“That low?”

He runs his tongue over his teeth, thinking. “You’re right. They were 40 to 1 a week ago. So someone placed a massive bet against you. What do you know that I don’t? Shug’s never fixed a match before, he earns enough on straight fights.”

“Shug is getting one last score. I think he’s selling us all off to Alf. Buyout. He’s going to secure his retirement betting against me.”

“So why the hell are you going along with this?”

“Because Maya’s pregnant.”

He takes a step back, eyes wide, understanding. “Gods. Khan, you don’t have to do this. You tell me we’re going to break out of this shithole, you’ve got my blade. Every one of the men will follow you. Shug lets me visit the markets, along with some of the other guys. Why don’t I take the men and we draw guards to us in a distraction, while you rally the rest for an escape?”

“It’s a good plan. But Shug is prepared. Too many would die, and if I don’t make it out...he would make her life a living hell. This is the only way her future is certain.”

“Did you tell her?”

I shake my head.

“That’s a good woman there. I can’t tell you how to live your life, but she deserves to know.” Garvin wipes the sweaty hair back from his scalp. When I don’t answer him, he pulls his blade from the sand and hefts it, throwing it from one hand to the other. “Lorenzo fights with a rapier. If you’re going to do this, you need to make it look convincing.”

“Yes. If Shug gets arrested for fixing a fight, he’ll take it out on her. Any ideas?” I’m speaking of my own death in analytical terms. I’ve compartmentalized it. As long as I don’t think of Maya, the pain almost feels unreal.

“Play up the limp. When you walk into the arena, move like you’re a stiff old man. Let your left arm hang, like it’s infected. The crowds have seen you wounded before, and they’ll buy it. But Khan—”

“I’ve made my choice.”

Garvin shrugs. “Alright. Then I’ll be Lorenzo Dusk, and you’ll be the wounded orc on his last legs. Start from the entrance, you need to make your walk believable.”

I turn and walk to the entrance of the gladiator quarters, and hold my blade tight in my right hand, letting my left hang loosely as I limp forward. I let the pain in my leg well up, moving heavily, my eyes fixed on Garvin.

We train for hours before he calls it, wheezing, putting his hand up before stumbling to the mess hall, exhausted from the hours of training. I’d forgotten how quick he was. When I practiced stumbling on my right leg, he darted around me, lancing out with his blade and jumping back before I could counter-attack.

He's right. The crowd will believe that the champion has been felled.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:30 pm

And Maya will be safe.

Other warriors have filed into the arena, some stretching, others pairing off for one-on-one practice. It's going to be the biggest games Corwinhold has seen since I have been a gladiator, and nearly every member of the stable will be tested. An entire twelve of them will be fighting in a team fight against twelve of Alf's pitfighters, and I'll need to introduce them to strategies I used long ago, when I was Montarok, when I led warriors into battle.

I bark out the orders for the dozen of them to line up, choosing twelve opponents, and my mind drifts back to battles my orcs fought, skirmishes against other tribes testing our mettle for territory, the sudden battle when we nearly ran into twenty of the king's men who were patrolling into our mountain home, and even that last day of horror, when I ordered the retreat when I should have ordered the all-out attack.

25

MAYA

My stomach grumbles as I yawn awake, alone in bed, the sounds of pitfighters training waking me as the noon light seeps into the room. I haven't slept that long in ages. My mind was exhausted, and the moment I wake, I have to face the uncomfortable tension. I reach over to the lump in the bed where Montarok's huge weight indented it, and I run my hand over the sheets, putting my nose into them and smelling him.

I hate waking up alone.

I splash water in my face, chew on some sweetgrass to freshen up, and do my morning exercise and stretches that always center my troubled mind, but I find myself thinking back to my village. My poor mom. She must be terrified for me. Little Thomas, with his leg—who took care of him while I was away?

I take in a deep breath, and change into light, loose-fitting clothes for comfort. I had been preparing myself for an escape attempt with Montarok, and now, I'm dealing with the realization that we're going to have to wait until we're sold off to Alf to plan our escape. And what happens after, when we're chased by—

One thing at a time.

Before I start spiralling, I make my way to the mess hall to get some grub. It's nearly empty, just a few gladiators resting on the beds, most of them training in the yards. Garvin's at the long wooden table, slouched over a bowl of stew, and his brown tunic is sweat-stained under the armpits.

I get a bowl from the huge cauldron and grab a piece of crusty bread, then sit across from him. He glances up at me, then back down to his bowl of food as if it is the most interesting thing in the world.

"You worked hard today," I say, pointing my wooden spoon at his sweat-soaked tunic. "You're going to have a match?"

He shrugs. "Just another easy one." Then silence, like I'm talking to a wall.

"Can I talk to you about something?"

He loads up his spoon and takes a huge bite, swallowing quickly. "I've got to get back to the ring to train, what is it?" He lifts the bowl to his face, downing it quickly, scraping the bowl, then stands, looking at me expectantly.

It's strange. He's always been polite to me. "Nothing, sorry, I just...I don't know, I've got this terrible feeling I can't quite place. Does anything seem off to you? Or did you hear anything about the fights that seems strange?"

"I feel it too. The little Lord Lucian loves bloodshed, and his daddy will provide on his birthday. Everyone here's under pressure. That's what you're feeling," he says.

"Okay," I say, as he leaves, and I slowly move my spoon in a circle around the bowl, forcing myself to eat a little bit at a time. When I'm done, I grab Garvin's bowl and mine and put it on the cart for the cleaners and go to my small, growing medical bay to make myself a mug of tea to soothe my stomach. I sip on it, watching through the barred window to the training grounds.

Twelve gladiators, humans, are up against another twelve, with Montarok pacing the battle lines and yelling out orders, barking at them to form up into units to protect each other. When he's satisfied, he steps to the side, yelling at them to begin.

The two lines charge, clashing together until Montarok stops the battle, singling out gladiators who broke the line and tried to fight on their own and dressing them down. Now I know what Garvin meant. There's going to be a larger scale battle than any of these men have ever prepared for, and the tension is infectious.

As Garvin strides out into the arena, he waves at Montarok. I watch, confused, as Montarok's leg suddenly pains him, and he limps to meet Garvin in battle. His left arm hangs loosely as the two men circle each other, and Montarok fights slowly, his blade moving stiffly. When he was directing the troops, he was able to hide his wounds, but now his old injuries are coming back with a vengeance.

I rack my brain for the concoctions of herbs I can make to loosen him up, and a poultice I can apply to his left arm that will restore blood flow. I don't like seeing him like this.

Montarok trips. He stumbles on his hurt leg, and Garvin pounces, darting forward and slicing his blunt blade against Montarok's neck. I gasp, stepping back from the window, a cold chill rushing through my body. I sit down heavily at the table, running my hands through my hair in anxiety.

I need to move. Sitting here in the pool of stress is only making things worse. I get up, smooth my clothes, and stride to the training arena. "Khan!" I yell, as Garvin helps him up.

He turns and walks to me. "What is it?"

"Your injuries. They've gotten worse. Come to the infirmary, I need to take a look at you."

He exchanges a glance with Garvin, then follows me, limping to my makeshift hospital. I sit him down on the bed, covered in a fresh white sheet and a big blanket, in case of bloody wounds. "You lost your balance. Did your leg give out?"

"I stumbled. Missed my foothold."

I purse my lips. "Okay, lean back." I put my hands on his injured leg. "Push forward," I say, and he pushes me back easily. "Were you weaker than normal?"

“No.”

“Any excess pain?”

He shakes his head. “Okay, now lift your foot upwards,” I say, holding down his foot with all my weight. He lifts me easily, breaking free of my grasp.

“I saw you out there, Montarok, you looked really stiff. I’m going to make you something to drink tonight that should help, and a poultice to wrap around your arm.”

“Thank you,” he says, but his voice is far-off, and he looks straight past me, at the wall.

I let out a huge breath. “Montarok.” I smile, because saying his name, his true name, is something he trusted only to me. “When I was in trouble, I confided in you. Please, if something’s going on...” My smile fades. “I’ve got this horrible feeling. I just need you to come back to me. He needs you,” I say, running my hand over my stomach.

He opens his mouth to speak, shuts it, then plants his eyes on my stomach, where soon, our child will grow. He told me he believes our baby will be a boy, but I’m not convinced, imagining a little girl with light green skin and black ponytails.

“I...I don’t want to bring more pain in your life. Not useless pain. Because I can’t change what’s going to happen.”

“Montarok?”

He looks up at me, his burning emerald eyes filled with pain. “Sit down,” he says, his voice grave. I want to reach out, touch him, comfort him, but the agony in his visage is not from his leg, and it scares me. I sit down beside him on the bed, looking up at my mountain of a man.

“What happen with Shug?”

“You were right. He’s going to sell his portfolio. At least, that’s the only thing that makes sense. So he’s doing one last match, and he’s going to secure his retirement. He’s placed huge bets on my opponent, Lorenzo Dusk, favorite of the little lord.”

“And you think he’ll punish us when you kill Lorenzo?”

“No.” He takes a huge breath in, then looks straight at me, up and down, each inch of my body like he is imprinting me in his mind so he will never forget this moment. “Lorenzo won’t lose. Either I throw the match, or he kills you.”

My heart pounds. “And did Shug make a deal with Lucian? That when you’re on your back, he’ll spare you?”

“There’s no deal. Fixing a match would get Shug thrown into prison. I’ll be at Lucian’s mercy.”

“He’ll let you die. Montarok, you can’t do this.” I get this surge of powerless frustration that makes me want to cry, because I see the stony expression on his face that tells me everything I need to know.

“So you’ll die for me, but you won’t live for me?”

His hand clenches in to a fist. “I’m doing the only thing I can. Shug is no fool. I could gather the men. Have Garvin make a distraction and try to break out. But he’s always

one step ahead. How many men would die? What would happen to you if I fail? I...I let down the people I cared about most once already. Their deaths are on my conscience. Yours won't be."

I reach out, grabbing his huge hand, and squeeze. "He needs you," I say, imagining a little boy, on his shoulders, laughing and squealing.

"What would you have me do?"

I sit up straight. All my anxiety is gone, all my stress at not knowing why I had the feeling of impending doom without a reason for it. Now I know the obstacle, and it's coming up fast...

But I can fight it.

"You just did. You told me. We've got a couple days to figure something out...and we're going to make them count. Shug is smart, but he's not as smart as us, together."

I get up and kiss him on the forehead. "So your leg is fine? And your arm is normal?"

"Yes. I was practicing how to sell the match with Garvin."

"Well, those men need you. They look like a bunch of schoolchildren, and they've never fought as a unit before. Go lead them." I smile, looking down at my huge brute of a man, knowing that somehow, someday, we're going to get out of this. "I won't have any malingering. Off you go," I say, and he manages a small smile before he leaves me, down the corridor to the arena.

Having a purpose will help him. Training those gladiators will keep him sharp and keep the dark pessimism at bay.

Now what I need is a very strong cup of tea, maybe two, and a good, long think.

I will not let Shug win.

26

MAYA

The day of the matches came in a blur. Time seemed to move fast, like the final grains slipping down an hourglass.

Shug has me to his right, in one of the seats of honor with an unobstructed view of the carnage. To his left is Alf, and guards press us in, dressed in Lord Corwin's charcoal greys, all heavily armed. Some of them have rifles slung over their shoulders, the technology controlled by the king and those in his favor.

The little Lord Lucian is three rows in front of us, leaning forward with glee as bodies are dragged away on stretchers. Of the twelve men in the group battle, nine survived, and Shug made a comment to Alf about what a good deal he was getting on the men.

My stomach roiled with each man felled. If I was in the hospital, I could have saved some of those lives—but Shug wants me by my side, and I know why.

He wants Montarok to see what he's dying for.

"You're a genius, Alf. This is a beautiful show you're putting on," says Shug in a sickly-sweet tone.

"The young lord seems to be enjoying it," says Alf, beaming, as if he did nothing more than put on a play. They exchange smiles, two men doing business, but Shug tenses up and casts a quick glance at me.

The announcer takes center stage of the sand-covered arena, jumping comically over a severed hand to laughs of the audience, before putting his wrist to his mouth. He has a black band around his wrist, and somehow it enhances his voice, making him echo and boom throughout the coliseum.

“He refused to pay his taxes to an overlord he accused of defiance to the king—a true patriot, a fighter of honor, Lorenzo Dusk!” The gate opens, and a tall, dark, hard man strides in. Lorenzo wears a purple cloak, swirling it like a bullfighter, and his blade is blueish steel, honed. He throws his blade in the air, and it twirls before he catches it, to roars from the crowd. Lucian is leaning forward nearly over the barrier, and one of his guards pulls him back, so he doesn’t fall into the ring in his excitement.

“The undefeated champion of Corwinhold, Khan, the orc of the north mountains!”

As Montarok limps in, the crowd hushes, and Shug relaxes, ever so slightly, seeing how badly his leg is painning him. His left arm hangs loosely, and he looks up at me, his emerald-green eyes picking me out from the crowd instantly, and we relish in this moment, knowing the stakes.

Unless this goes perfectly, unless he can time everything to the exact moment...

Our future ends in the thirsting sands.

The announcer rushes out, going through a side door, leaving the two combatants to face each other down. Lorenzo is quick, and he wastes no time, darting forward and twirling, diving to Montarok’s weak side and lashing out with his rapier. It cuts into his side, drawing red blood, and Montarok sweeps his blade wildly as the disgraced lord jumps back, out of reach, and raises his bloody sword to the crowd. The crowd goes wild, half in favor of the reigning champ, half cheering on the patriotic newcomer who has become a folk hero, a handsome lord who risked his life for his convictions.

I grip the armrests white knuckled as Montarok steps forward, swinging, but his blow is too slow, and Lorenzo ducks under him, slicing out and raking his blade against his injured leg. That's when the first wave of panic hits me, seeing how deeply the cut went, blood pouring down my man's thigh. Back and forth they battle, Lorenzo keeping out of Montarok's reach, diving in to cut him and escaping before he can react, cut after cut, blood dripping from a dozen different places. Montarok roars, his mouth wide open, fangs gleaming, a roar of pain and anger at the quicker, younger man who torments him.

Montarok is slowing. His breath is heaving, his leg barely keeping him up as he tries to track down his opponent. Then Lorenzo darts forward for the killing blow.

Now!

With viper-like speed, Montarok's blade rises, and the handsome lord's head twirls in the air, flipping and landing in the sands.

But his blade went true.

Montarok looks down at the rapier embedded in his chest. He grabs it and pulls it out, then stumbles. He looks up at me, his green eyes burning for me and me alone...

And then he falls.

With a heavy thud, the champion hits the ground, the sand drinking up his blood as he is felled.

"No, no, no!" yells Lucian, smacking his hands against the stone barrier, enraged that his champion was killed. The crowd is dead silent. Shug's fleshy face goes white. He snarls and grabs me by the wrist, marching me out, his guards pushing their way through the crowd as he marches me to the wagon. I'm thrown into the cage roughly,

and the journey is done without a word.

With his guards threatening me with swords, he forces me downstairs, into the dark recesses of his manor and into a cell.

“Your man has damned you. You won’t see the sun again,” he snarls, and I see true hatred, and something else in Shug’s eyes...

Fear.

He just lost his fortune, and his favor with Lord Corwin after the disaster of the fight.

I pace the cell, back and forth, the tension building, replaying the fight in my mind over and over, seeing each cut in my man’s stony green skin, then that final, devastating blow into his chest, and tears form in my eyes.

27

KHAN

I wake as if from death, coughing, choking, unable to breathe, and the deerskin pouch flies out of my throat. I reach down to my chest. Coagulated blood coats my body. I'm in total darkness, the iron stink of my wounds filling my nostrils, the bitter taste of the stillroot in my mouth. I kick, hard, banging against the metal door, and my long slab in the morgue creaks out.

I pull myself up with a pained groan, my muscles barely registering my commands, each movement a battle as I adjust to the pale, artificial light of the morgue. I'm deep below Shug's estate, and the other compartments are filled with the fresh dead from the battle, to be sold off to medical schools for organs. It's icy cold.

I spit, the greyness of the stillroot in my saliva. I trusted her completely, the dosage that would put me into a sleep like death, so deep the drunken doctor would proclaim me dead.

Then it was all up to me. I crushed the mixture in my mouth as I swung, and the last thing I saw was Lorenzo's head flying from his shoulders, the last thing I felt was his blade cutting into my chest, and I did not know if he had pierced my heart or missed it, not knowing if I would ever wake again, thinking only of her in my final moments.

She has done her part.

Now I must have the strength to do mine. I'm light-headed from blood loss, lightning

pain from the dozen cuts, but I stumble forward, ready to take Shug's men by surprise, when my right leg gives out.

I hit the ground hard, groaning, but I can't give up. I grab the medical gurney and pull myself up.

On it are iron tools. I grab the wooden handled surgeon's knife, like a toy in my huge hand. I slap my thighs, avoiding the wounds, getting blood flowing back in them. My cuts are covered in sticky, ruddy blood, my skin knitting together, but each step I take makes thick blood drip down my legs.

I only need to be strong a little longer.

A strange smile comes to my lips, a smile I haven't had since I felt the rush of a true battle, snowy winds slapping against my skin, biting shards of ice melting against my body as I prepared for war, leading my tribe against all who threatened us.

I limp to the door and turn the handle. Unlocked. No one expects someone to come back from the dead. No guards outside, just a long, dimly lit hallway. Something makes me look back into the chilled morgue, my slow thoughts clearing. There is a small metal chest in the corner. It clicks open, and the vials filled with white seed are inside, three slightly darker from the herbs, half filled, the other still intact and to the brim. I grab them and throw them against the walls, shattering them. Even if I don't make it out of here alive, no son of mine will be forced into the pits.

I don't know these underground tunnels, but the plan is set. I trust Garvin with my life, and he has the men ready to scale the walls, every man knowing what he must do.

But it will be up to me to take Shug by surprise. He's got the vast bulk of his guards patrolling the gladiator's quarters, and he won't be expecting me.

And those guards were set up to watch me. With his financial disaster betting a fortune on the match, the hope is that he's already fired the bulk of his men.

I drag my leg down the hallway, each step, my sluggish muscles growing stronger, when I sniff, smelling her familiar scent. I wasn't sure if Shug would throw her into a jail cell or keep her in the gladiators' quarters until he decided what to do with her—but the one thing I knew is he wouldn't harm her, not when he's lost his fortune and he'll need to sell off the baby in her belly.

A stairwell is ahead of me, but I pause, sniffing the air, and turn right down another hallway.

The guard is sitting slumped on a stool, a little wooden table in front of him covered in cards, playing solitaire. He looks up in shock, reaching for his sword, when I fling my knife. It lands in his throat, cutting off his shout to raise the alarm. I finish him off and take the keys from a ring in his belt, and open the cell door.

Maya's sitting on a small cot. She jumps up when she sees me, and runs to me, but stops before she hugs me, looking at my myriad of wounds. "Oh Gods, Montarok, it must hurt so much."

"Stay here," I say, my voice a rasp. "No matter what you hear, don't come out. I will be back for you."

"You're hurt, I can get something to—"

I raise my hand up. "You did all you needed to. Trust me. I will get us out of here."

She's already ripping up the sheet from her bed. I let her wrap white cloth around my deepest cuts, around my chest, and they stain a dull red as I pull myself out of the cell and close the door behind me. I loot the sword from the guard, the weight of it certain

in my grip.

This is what I was made for. This is what I was destined to be.

I climb the stairs, holding onto the railing, and push open the trapdoor, launching myself up into the estate. The manor is asleep, and I walk softly through the hallways, waiting for any guard to challenge me, until I get to the corner. Around it is the master bedroom.

I grip the sword, turn the corner, and charge.

I cut down the first guard in a single strike, then drive my blade forward, stopping an inch from the second's throat.

It is Robert, the red-bearded guard who always treated me fairly. He pants in fear, wide eyed, then drops his sword with a clatter. I throw him against the doors, bowling them open, and stride in.

Shug is in his bed, waking up, shirtless and flabby.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:31 pm

“How?” he gasps.

“Bring him to me,” I say to Robert, who looks at me, then Shug, and grabs him, hauling him out of bed. He looks ridiculous in his briefs, old and afraid, his belly flopping out obscenely.

“How many guards do you have?” I bark it out to Shug, who stammers, unable to answer.

“He just fired all the new ones. Sent them packing earlier,” answers Robert. “They were there in case you tried something. We thought you were...”

“Robert. You’re going to unlock the armory. Then you’re going to go to the gladiators’ quarters, and you’re going to let them out. No one will get hurt if you don’t resist. We outnumber you.”

“Aye.”

“You do as he says and—” I slap Shug before he can finish his sentence. One of his teeth flies out, clattering against the floor.

I can see from Robert’s eyes he won’t try anything. He knows, as well as I do, that Shug isn’t going to survive the night. “None of you will have a job after tonight. No one hires a guard who couldn’t protect his master,” I rasp out. “But you’ll each get a share from his estate. His wealth is your future.”

“Thank you, Khan.”

“That name is dead. I am Montarok, Chieftain of the black-adder tribe.”

28

MAYA

I keep my ear against the door, but there is no sound, until the heavy, uneven footsteps that I know are his. I throw the door open.

Montarok. He's clad in thick leather armor, and he hands me the leather satchel, filled with my herbs and medical supplies.

“Is it over?”

“It's over. But we need to move, fast. The dawn is in four hours, and I plan to be as far away from here as possible.”

“And Shug?”

There's a cold expression in his eyes. “He was dragged into the training grounds. All the gladiators who felt he wronged them decided his fate.” I swallow, hard, knowing that he never left those grounds.

He extends his huge, green hand to me, and I take it, walking by his side, past the dead guard whose blood is dripping on the floor, up the stairs and into the estate, where gladiators with swords are grabbing everything that isn't bolted down, one with a huge sack full of silverware. Peter is grinning as he bites a gold bar, leaving teeth marks in it. I even recognize the red-bearded guard, who to my shock, instead of being bound as a prisoner, has a sword at his belt and a sack filled with his own loot. He nods in respect to Montarok as he passes.

“He works...he worked for Shug.”

“They could see how the chips were going to fall. I let them each have a small share, in return for giving up without a fight. No one wants to go up against a horde of gladiators.”

“Come with me, Maya,” he says, and we walk together out of the estate, where gladiators are loading up the wagons with supplies.

“What happens now?”

He smiles, and for the first time in too long, I see the flickers of hope.

“You told me my tribe needed me. It’s time I take my rightful place.”

29

MAYA

THREE YEARS LATER

As I gently trace the coiled black snake tattoo on Montarok's muscular arm, lilac flowers burst into bloom around us, filling the secluded valley with a sweet aroma. It's hard to believe it's been three years since we first arrived at his ancestral mountain home. Back then, the tribe's sixty or so orcs were gaunt and malnourished, their food supplies dwindling. Montarok was overjoyed to find that Brond had survived in the blizzard, stumbling back wounded to the mountain home, and within a few years, had risen to a position of power, but he had never gone into the cave of adders to formally become chieftain. He told Montarok that he had a vision of his return, and while the tribe's numbers grew smaller each year, they clung with a tenacious grasp to their mountain home. Brond welcomed Montarok as leader, and now works as a seer,

using his visions to guide our tribe.

The sun casts its golden warmth over the thriving landscape, and my medicinal herbs flourish in their dedicated cave.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:31 pm

Nearby, Mendus, our son with his light jade-green skin and curly dark brown hair, trips and tumbles onto the flower bed. He lays on his back, giggling and staring at the sky, seemingly as content as we are. I can't help but marvel at how Montarok was right about our first child—a strong, healthy boy whose adventurous spirit keeps me on my toes. I have to watch him like a hawk or he'll try to climb up onto stalagmites in the caves or find his way into the dried fruit stores.

We're seated on finely crafted wooden chairs, the work of one of our fellow escapees from the gladiator pits. A master craftsman in his former life, he'd only ended up enslaved after a drunken brawl with a noble. Life has taken a turn for the better for all of us. Out of the fifty people who escaped captivity with us, only two have moved on. Many have found love, including my best friend Zephyr, who is now happily wedded to a handsome orc man. We waited months after our escape to sneak back to the village, and Zephyr and my mom looked like they saw a ghost when I knocked at the doors. I knew my mom would want to come with us, but Zephyr shocked me by insisting she travel to the mountains with us to see how the orcs live. When she met a young warrior of the tribe, she never left.

Even more surprising was the unlikely pairing of Garvin and Martiltha, one of the tribe's formidable orc women.

“That’s your last drink tonight, you sneak another and we’re going to have some trouble,” growls Martiltha, the only woman who has been able to tame Garvin. He gives her a sheepish grin, savoring the last gulp of the cider he’s perfected over the three years in the mountain. Martiltha is a foot taller than him, with beautiful green eyes and long black braids that go down to her waist. They’re both sitting next to us, watching the children playing in the fields.

Nearby, my mother, who we moved from the village to be with us, is happily fussing over Mendus. She has adjusted well to her new life, becoming an unofficial grandmother to the tribe's children and taking particular delight in spoiling her first grandchild. She and Martiltha, who sits beside us, exchange warm smiles as they watch the children play in the fields.

As I lose myself in these peaceful moments, Montarok's eyes meet mine. He smiles at me—the kind of easy, comfortable smile that seemed unimaginable when we first met in the slave auction, a peace I never could have dreamed of during the stressful days in captivity together. He leans in and kisses me tenderly, his large hands softly running through my hair, which is now braided in the traditional plaits of his tribe.

And together, I know we can face whatever comes our way.

* * *