



Ironhold, Trial Five

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Category: Fantasy

Description: In her final season as a gladiator, Lyra Thornwind becomes the focal point of brewing rebellion, arena politics, and magical intrigue. She must navigate a precarious balance between playing the game to survive and undermining it from within. Her final choice between Alaric and Rowan reflects her decision about the type of person she wants to be. The series culminates in an epic battle where Lyra must rally humans and beasts alike against a corrupt system, redefine the meaning of champion, and help shape the future of Aethoria.

In the captivating world of IRONHOLD, romance, danger, and fantasy intersect in a universe brimming with magic and peril. This gripping saga keeps readers of all ages spellbound, offering a unique twist on the genre. Be swept away by a narrative that seamlessly blends destiny, passion and sorcery with fierce combat, set against a backdrop both brutal and mesmerizing. The IRONHOLD series promises an enthralling adventure that will leave you breathless and craving more.

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They met in the spaces beneath the city. Not in the temple of Deira, the goddess of beasts; Elara could not risk that when she did not trust those she was meeting. None of them deserved to be there, in any case.

But the city of Aetheria had more than enough places that it had built over in the course of its existence. There were sewers and levels of buildings that had sunken crypts and tunnels.

The current space was in the middle of one of those crypts, flanked by lines of urns containing the ashes of the dead. It was a place with many ways in and out, a place where they could meet without fear of being ambushed. It was lit by small magical stones Elara had brought for the purpose, to avoid the choking smoke of torches.

There were plenty of figures there. Many wore cloaks, disguising their identities, but Elara had watched them through the eyes of creatures as they approached. Even now, they underestimated the power of her kind.

There were many different individuals there, representing the various factions within the city. There were members of the spectral covenant, of course, her fellow beast whisperers waiting for the chance to change things, to rise up and tear the throats from the world that had pushed them down for so long. There were people wearing the colors of the various gangs within the city slums, who ran things in their areas as much as the empire ever did. There were a few merchants, a few representatives of each of the guilds and the trades.

There were even some nobles. Elara didn't know how much she could trust them, but it seemed that they were as determined to change the city as she was, just in their own

way. She suspected that each faction had its own ideas about how the city should be run once things were changed, that the nobles probably just wanted a change of emperor while maintaining the current system, that the gangs probably wanted the kind of anarchy in which they could profit.

It was vital that things changed her way.

What did Elara want? She had asked herself this question over and over. Did she want just a version of the empire in which beast whisperers such as herself would not be persecuted, not be rooted out, rounded up and executed? Where she had influence, perhaps the throne itself.

Or did she want revenge? Did she want to pay the empire back for everything that had been done to her kind? Did she want to reduce it to ashes so that she could rebuild in the aftermath?

The answer to that question would rely at least a little on how this meeting went. Today would decide whether she sought continuity and stability, or to tear down everything in her path.

She stood in front of the others, next to a tomb. She had chosen this spot for reasons other than the ease with which they could escape if it came to it.

This is the tomb of Marcus Alexis,

she said. Three hundred years ago, he led the ruling council of the Republic of Aetheria.

There were a couple of intakes of breath around her. She suspected that some of the figures there didn't know much about the history of the city, at least this part. It wasn't something that was taught because the emperors didn't want it known.

No one talks about this period of our city's history because they want to make it seem obvious and natural that we must have emperors, that we must be ruled by a single family who claim to have given us everything.

You wish to deny the role Emperor Tiberius's ancestors played in discovering the way magic flowed out from the stones beneath the city?

a figure asked. He was one of the nobles, of course.

Elara looked over to him. They played a role in it, certainly, and then they parlayed that into control, declaring that since they had given the city this magic, they should be the ones to rule it. They used their own magic and that of their followers to take control.

And so now you want to give control back to all the people?

one of the representatives from the merchants said. He sounded nervous, as if worrying about the effects that such a thing would have on his business.

Don't sound so scared,

one of the gang leaders said with a laugh. We wouldn't take much of your gold.

Elara knew that she had to interrupt. Joke or not the comment exposed too many of the splits between them, the different ways in which their interests pulled them.

I wanted to remind you that it is not inevitable for one of Emperor Tiberius's family to rule in Aetheria.

No, you would rather have beast whisperers running the city,

the nobleman said. No doubt we would have to give our firstborn to be devoured by your kind.

We are not animals,

Elara said, keeping her temper in check with an effort. We do not eat people, we do not go on rampages, and we are not controlled by our passions.

Not yet. Those are rumors that were spread under the emperor in order to justify pushing us out.

We've heard plenty of rumors about you,

one of the gang leaders said. How is Lyra Thornwind?

Elara had started most of those rumors herself, that she had taken on Lyra's patronage to become romantically involved with her. It was something expected of patrons, because many of them saw these young strong gladiators and realized that they could buy power over them. Many of them did exactly what the rumors said she had been doing with Lyra.

She is ready to play her part,

Elara said. She looked around the crypt. What is the heart of Aetheria?

The games,

the nobleman said, without hesitation.

And who is currently the favorite gladiator within the games?

Elara asked. She needed them to see the role that Lyra could play.

I take your point,

the nobleman said. But that doesn't mean things will be easy.

When was anything worthwhile ever easy?

Elara countered. Our noble sons and daughters throw themselves into the games, risking their lives for honor and glory. Our lower classes live lives where they do not know where their next meal is coming from. The city enslaves those it wants from beyond its borders, to live lives of drudgery even if they are not thrown into the colosseum.

And do you think that is enough to make people rise up?

the merchant said.

I think that there is already unrest in the city,

Elara countered. Everyone here is discontented. Those of you who represent the common folk have been fighting in the streets because of the lack of grain. The nobles have seen the emperor's madness and his cruelty. You are already thinking of which of you might be a good replacement. My people have been pushed to the brink because of his visions of a beast whisperer bringing him down.

Well, he isn't wrong, is he?

the nobleman said. After all, you're here plotting against him.

And that would not have happened if it weren't for his actions,

Elara said. She wondered briefly if the emperor understood the role his paranoia around his visions had played in bringing about the current situation. The anger he had built in the hearts of the beast whisperers. What I'm saying is that each of us has a reason to rise up in our own ways, but we are stronger if we do it together.

That hardly sounds like a reason to go along with your plans,

the gang leader said.

Working with you means working for you,

the nobleman said. I assume that you will make yourself empress after this? No, we will have no part of it. We will do things our own way.

As will we,

the gang leader said.

You are being foolish,

Lady Elara said. Lyra Thornwind is a powerful symbol, and this is a crucial moment. The empire will change at the conclusion of the next games. The question is whether you want to be a part of it or whether you stand against it.

That sounds like a threat,

the nobleman said, and a couple of bodyguards near him put their hands on their swords. A couple of beast whisperers took steps forwards.

Enough,

Lady Elara said. We did not come here to fight, but to try to forge an alliance that might change the world. I suggest you all go away and think about that possibility.

They drifted off. Lady Elara had suspected that this might happen. The factions within the city did not trust one another. She could not unite them, because in truth a part of her didn't want to. She had thought to use them, but it was hard to do that when she suspected that they needed to pay as much as all the others.

What now?

one of the beast whisperers remaining asked. We need them.

Lady Elara shook her head. They would have been useful in one way of doing this, but there is another. We have what we need. Each of you will go to your appointed positions, and we will unleash the animals of Aetheria when the moment is right.

Can we hope to control so many beasts?

another of her followers asked.

Lady Elara nodded. Lyra Thornwind is a powerful weapon. At the end of the games, Aetheria will see just how powerful. We will unleash the crowd and the beasts. There will be fury, and violence and death. Come the conclusion of the games, all those who have hurt us will pay the price.

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My opponent circles me, pacing carefully, never taking its eyes off me. Its tail swishes in the moment before it strikes, giving me just enough time to get to the haft of my spear up between us.

The shadow cat leaps, but it's a trick. Rather than leaping directly at me, it leaps at my shadow, pouncing on it and disappearing into it with the magic of its kind. It seems to melt into the ground, and I spin, knowing it will already be reappearing somewhere else.

It does, jumping out of a spot away to my left where a couple of bales of hay have left their shadow across the ground. This is what makes the creatures so dangerous. In the wild, the great cats with their ink dark coats would hunt through the forest, slinking from one shadow to the next, pouncing on unsuspecting prey. In the colosseum of Aetheria, they are deadly additions to any games, adding an element of surprise and unpredictability to the bouts that is in contrast to the brute power of other beasts.

The shadow cat leaps at me again, and I twist my lean frame away from it. I'm clad in the brief skirt, sandals and halter top that Ironhold gives to its female gladiators for training. My skin started pale but has been bronzed by the time I have spent fighting and training in the hot sun of Aetheria. My golden hair whips around as I dodge the shadow cat's attack. I'm close enough to see the deep gold of the creature's eyes, utterly alien compared to my own blue.

We move around, circling one another again. I am starting to sweat, but the creature is breathing hard as well, it focuses on me, ready to leap once more. It is still small for one of its kind, but it is almost fully grown now.

My foot catches and I stumble just for a moment but that is enough for the shadow cat. It pounces on me, my spear barely holding its claws off me, its mouth open to display teeth like daggers. It is heavier than I expect it to be, its weight pinning me down, and for a moment I know fear.

Then I reach out with the power that is my birthright, the magic that lives within me. There is a golden thread of connection between myself and the shadow cat. I whisper along it from mind to mind.

“That’s enough playing for now.”

The shadow cat makes a sound of disappointment, licks my face once with a sandpaper tongue, as if to prove it can, and then lets me up.

“I still don't understand the connection you have with that creature,”

Stefano, the master of beasts at Ironhold, says. He is a solidly built man in his fifties, with thinning, dark hair and a bushy mustache. His talent is for healing, although he mostly reserves it for the animals. He seems to genuinely love the creatures in his care. “Is it harder with that dampener in place?”

He nods towards the leather strap on my left wrist, worked with magical runes. It is a device designed to contain the powers of the wearer, and which cannot be removed by them. Mine was put in place to limit me after I was deemed a danger to the crowd. It should restrict me to just a trickle of magic but the arch magistrate, Selene Ravenscroft, has surreptitiously altered it so that it now only appears to be a dampener. I have access to my full powers; I just can't show it. No one can see that I am not contained the way I should be.

“I think it helps that I already have a connection to the cat,”

I say, with a smile towards the shadow cat. It slinks back into place in its pen. Most of the other shadow cats in the beast pens are kept within magically engraved cages designed to stop them from using their powers. The Aetherian Empire has come up with many ways to contain those people and things who possess magic.

“Thank you for letting me train down here, Stefano,”

I say. Ordinarily, the master of beasts would not allow gladiators to simply come down here to practice with the creatures. He would be afraid for the safety of both the gladiators and the beasts.

“Well, I know you're not going to hurt them,”

Stefano says, “and I guess you have the skills to keep from being hurt in return.”

Even with me, those are his priorities; he cares more about his creatures than he does about the gladiators who come and go within Ironhold. He makes it sound like a simple thing that I'm allowed to train down here, but in truth it makes a huge difference to me.

I have almost no one else to train with.

I leave the beast pens heading to the bathhouse.

Some of the other female gladiators are in there, but they all stay away from me.

Many of them look afraid, and a couple of them look at me with jealousy, as if I have some kind of status beyond that of a mere slave gladiator, with an iron ring around my neck marking me as less than those who have entered the games voluntarily.

I see the gladiator Cesca in one of the pools.

She is relatively new to the games.

Each of us has a brand on our left shoulder: a perfect circle burned into our flesh, with lines across it marking the number of seasons we have survived in the colosseum.

Her brand has a single line across it, while mine has four.

One more and I will be free, while she must survive four more seasons in the colosseum.

Not just free.

If I survive five seasons, I will be a champion of the games.

I will be a noble of Aetheria and accorded every honor.

Any children I have will be noble, and I will no doubt get offers of positions within noble households, maybe even offers of marriage.

There is a reason that some of the free citizens of the city choose to come into the games, even the nobles.

They see it as a path to advancement within Aetheria, as a way to prove themselves worthy of positions of power and influence.

In a city built on the twin pillars of magic and military might, the arena is the way to prove that they embody its virtues.

Cesca looks over as I enter the pool.

She briefly looks afraid, and I find it hard to believe that someone I know should feel that way about me.

But somewhere in my time within the arena I have acquired a reputation for ruthlessness, even as I have tried to be as merciful as I can.

She backs away from me, making to leave the pool.

“Cesca, where are you going?”

I ask her.

She can barely bring herself to look at me. “You're a dangerous person to be around. You know they say you killed your last patron? And I saw the way you killed Ravenna. Being your friend... it didn't do Naia or Zara a lot of good, did it?”

I want to snap at her, but I know she has a reason to feel pain about at least Zara's death. Cesca has a habit of attaching herself to stronger gladiators for protection within the prison fortress of Ironhold. She picked out Ravenna, and then Zara, as protectors at different points, and I'm pretty sure Cesca and Zara were lovers for a time. It means I've taken people from her and also taken away some of her protection.

“I didn't mean for either of them to die,” I say.

She gestures to me. “This is what you do. You pretend to be so innocent. Like you would never do anything to hurt someone. But then you're happy enough to kill them when you have a reason to. And it doesn't matter if you mean it. People keep dying around you. It isn't safe to be near you.”

She collects her things and heads for the door. The others in the baths don't leave immediately, but they don't come near me either. They don't want anything to do with

me. They don't seem to want to risk it. I don't think any of them hate me, but I'm almost certain most of them are afraid of me now. That isn't something I want, but it's also not something I can give my attention to correcting.

I finish up in the bathhouse and head to the dining hall of the fortress. Mostly it is filled with the slave gladiators and the poorest among the free ones, because the nobles have their food brought to them in their rooms. Again, I can feel eyes on me as I walk in, looking at me warily, as if wondering what I will do next.

There is only one welcoming face in the room. Rowan sits at one of the tables, broad-shouldered and heavily muscled with auburn hair and green eyes. He waves me over to him. I grab a bowl of stew and join him. Rowan is one of the few comforting presences at Ironhold for me now. He's also one of the only people prepared to train with me outside of the formal training every morning.

“Have you been down in the beast pits again?” he asks.

I nod. “It's good training.”

“It's dangerous when your powers are bound,”

he replies.

I haven't even been able to tell him that I have my powers back. Anyone who knows would be in danger. As far as the world is concerned, I am effectively a null, one of the few in Aetheria without even a hint of magic. Rowan has only a little magic but he makes the most of his control over earth and stone, either to make the ground unsteady under his opponents' feet, or to sense what they are doing through the vibrations of the earth.

“I'm just working with the shadow cat,” I say.

“Even with that, you don't have the control that you should,”

Rowan insists. “What if it turns on you?”

“It won't,”

I assure him.

“You can't know that,”

he insists.

I need a way to distract him before he pushes me to say too much, and I can only think of one.

“Has Lady Tyra been in contact with you again?” I ask.

Lady Tyra is Rowan's former owner, before she sold him into the colosseum.

Rowan has a thin, silvery scar on his cheek, which she inflicted on him when she tired of him, trying to make sure that no one would find him handsome again.

It hasn't worked. If anything, it only adds to the character of his face. The noblewoman has started trying to reassert her control over Rowan, using the fact that she still has his sisters as her property.

“She wants me to spend time with her during the next games,”

Rowan says. “I won't have much choice about it.”

His tone is bitter.

He has three successful seasons in the Colosseum, with two more to go before his freedom.

Once he's free he hopes to be able to buy his sisters out of servitude.

But none of that counts for anything right now.

I wish I could help him with it, but there is only one thing I can focus on at the moment, and that is Alaric.

Alaric, beautiful Alaric, with his features too fine to ever be called merely handsome, and his waves of dark hair, his lean body and his caustic self-regard.

He currently languishes in a cell somewhere within Aetheria.

He waits for judgment after he killed a gladiator to save me.

He is noble born, with a family probably higher born than anyone else who has given themselves into the games, but I am not sure if that will help him in this.

Not when the emperor seems to be pushing for his punishment.

The penalty for killing another gladiator outside of a sanctioned match is death.

Alaric's family and connections have delayed that, but I am not sure that they can avoid it forever.

If he had been a slave gladiator such as myself, his body would already be on one of the impaling spikes set around the perimeter of Ironhold.

I must find a way to help him, but the truth is I have very few options from within the

fortress.

Maybe if I get out of Ironhold, if I find a position within Aetheria's nobility, I will be able to gain enough influence to save him, to protect him.

That is the reason I am so desperate to succeed.

I'm not just fighting for my freedom but for his, as well.

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It is hard to keep track of the days at Ironhold. Every morning we train, out in the practice spaces, drilling with our weapons in long lines, running and lifting heavy rocks to develop our bodies.

“Now wrestling practice! Partner up!”

We work under the watchful eye of Lord Darius, the former gladiator who is master of Ironhold.

He is in his late forties now, but there is still a hardness to him even though his dark hair is peppered with grey.

I know from experience that he truly believes in the holy nature of the games, seeing them as an essential rite to please the gods and give magical power to the stones beneath the city from which all our powers flow.

When it comes to the line drills, I train with a spear and a weighted chain which features a hooked blade on the end.

The combination makes me a long-range fighter who must seek to dodge and move in my bouts, avoiding close-range fighting as much as possible.

But I must wrestle along with the others, partly just because I've been commanded to and partly because, if an opponent does close with me, I need to be able to break away and return to the distance where I am used to fighting.

I find myself partnered with Cesca, who doesn't look happy about it.

We practice trips and throws together, but the majority of the wrestling practice is just going against one another, trying to throw one another again and again.

Soon we are both covered in dust from our battles.

Around us the others are practicing in the same way.

Rowan is throwing his partners with ease, his size and strength coupled now with the experience of having fought in multiple games within the Colosseum.

He is as experienced a gladiator as I am, even if he has one mark fewer crossing the circle of his brand.

“Switch partners!”

Lord Darius commands.

He oversees so much of our training personally, as if wanting to make sure that each of us is trained to the highest pitch of perfection before we are cast into the games to live or die.

It is one of the paradoxes of the colosseum that we are trained with care and attention, given the best food, healers, experts in massage and physical preparation, only to be set against one another in fights to the death.

I head for Rowan, but Cesca gets to him first.

I can see her eyes roving over him as she approaches, and she puts a sway into her step that I suspect is designed to catch his eye.

Again, it seems to me that she's looking for someone stronger to latch onto in order to

make sure that she survives her time.

I can't even blame her for it.

She has some magic, but she is smaller and weaker than most others here.

I end up with a muscular female gladiator who seems to be a part of the latest intake, because the brand on her shoulder has no marks across it yet.

She wears the iron collar of a slave gladiator.

There are always new arrivals at Ironhold, taken from around the empire because they have displayed magical talents, and Aetheria is determined to claim them all for itself.

The city says that magic flows outwards from it, so any who display magical talents beyond its walls belong to it.

Now, I know that it is a way of ensuring that Aetheria maintains control over magic, not giving the frontiers enough magical practitioners to mount an uprising.

Aetheria keeps itself powerful with those it takes and weakens the fringes of its empire.

"I'm Lyra,"

I say to the gladiator, because I don't know her.

She has cut her dark hair short so that no one can get a grip on it, while her deep brown eyes lock onto mine without warmth.

“Aya,”

she replies, in an unfriendly tone.

We circle one another and come to grips.

It's obvious from the start that she isn't holding back.

She's bigger and stronger than me, and I must move around cautiously, trying to find angles where she can't bring her whole strength to bear.

She grabs me, throwing me to the ground hard and then landing on top of me with her full weight to pin me in place. The move knocks the breath from my lungs.

“You're not so tough,”

she says, as she does it.

I manage to squirm out from underneath her, but she grabs me again, lifting me and throwing me with bruising force.

“How are you the favorite gladiator of the Colosseum?”

Aya demands.

She continues to out-wrestle me, using her greater size and strength to pick me up and fling me around.

I try to trip her, to catch her out, but it's obvious she's used to fighting at close quarters.

And it seems she wants to prove a point by hurting me.

As one of the gladiators with the most experience here, I'm a target now.

She must know she can make her name by beating me convincingly in practice.

So she does.

She throws me this way and that, not giving me a chance to get my breath back.

“Change partners!”

Lord Darius calls.

I see Cesca pull back from Rowan with a lingering touch as he releases her from the pin he's been holding her in. He looks briefly confused and embarrassed. I go to work with him, but I don't make it there.

“Not you, Lyra Thornwind. A patron has come for you.”

Shock runs through me at those words, along with fear at what might be about to happen.

I shouldn't be surprised that I have acquired a new patron.

I have been without a patron for weeks now, and as one of the most successful gladiators in the games, it was inevitable that a noble would decide they wanted to forge a connection with me.

I suspect that if I weren't a beast whisperer, I would already have attracted a new patron.

As it is the nobles are being cautious, not least because of the rumors that I somehow had my previous patron killed.

In any case, they don't want to risk upsetting the emperor by being closely linked to me when he continues to think that I might be a threat to him, and has all beast whisperers persecuted.

But now, someone has decided it is worth the risk.

Perhaps the price of my patronage is cheap enough now that a minor noble thinks they can gain something by being seen with me.

Perhaps someone has simply decided that they gain more than they lose by being around me.

Whatever has happened I don't have a choice about it.

None of the gladiators here do, even the nominally free ones.

The only advantage they have is that there are limits to the commands that their patrons can give them.

But they cannot deny a patron access.

The whole system of the Colosseum seems to be based on connecting the most powerful gladiators with the nobility, drawing them in and making them a part of it if they succeed in the games.

But that is exactly what makes me fear what might happen next.

As a slave gladiator, a noble patron can do almost anything they wish with me.

They can hurt me, use me, as they wish.

The prospect of that makes me shake with the terror of what might be done to me.

And still, I have no choice.

I'm forced to follow a trainer up through the fortress.

Ironhold is a place of granite walls and flickering torches, in contrast to the beautiful marble of the city below.

It seems designed at every step to remind us that we are captives here, held in by the great walls, patrolled by soldiers who have their own glimmers of power.

Fear builds in me as the trainer leads me through the interior of the fortress.

The last time a patron paid to see me, it was because she wanted to hurt me.

Ravenna's mother had decided to take his revenge for me killing her in the arena.

She is dead now, but there's nothing stopping another patron from being as cruel, or worse.

I am led to a large, mostly empty room in one of the higher parts of the fortress, where there is a single couch.

I steel myself for the sight of whoever will be there waiting for me, and I'm surprised to find that it's a familiar figure: a woman in her forties, her dark hair pinned in place by a golden comb, wearing a white dress trimmed with more gold.

"Lady Elara,"

I exclaim as I step into the room.

The trainer shuts the door behind us, and Lady Elara sweeps me up in a hug.

I suspect that's for the benefit of the trainer if he tries to sneak a last glimpse of us.

The noble woman has long put out the rumor that she became my patron only because she was infatuated with me, and that she had taken me as her lover.

It is a rumor that makes her look a little weak to the other nobles, ruled by her emotions.

But it serves to disguise the real nature of the connection between us: that she is a fellow beast whisperer, the head of an organization dedicated to protecting them from persecution within the empire: the spectral covenant.

“We must be careful what we say,”

she whispers to me.

“I would have brought you to my home, but there are limits to what I can do at the moment.

If I come to you, it looks like I simply can't keep away.

If I bring you to me, I'm making a more formal claim of patronage.”

“Would that be such a bad thing now?”

I ask. “I am without a patron, and the emperor has put aside his claim on me.”

“Tiberius is jealous,”

Lady Elara says. “If he sees me claim you as mine again, he may prevent it just to spite me, or you.”

“You think he cares enough about me for that?” I ask.

“Consider who he sent you as your last patron,”

Lady Elara says. “The mother of a gladiator you killed? He thinks you're safe enough with that dampener on your wrist, but that doesn't mean he's going to be kind to you. He will allow me this much, I think. Maybe more. I will think on it.”

“Why did you come here?”

I ask, still staying close to her, still whispering. I have no doubt that the guards listen. It means we must be careful. Besides me being this close shows them what they expect to see.

“I came to tell you that the time is almost right for the rebellion.”

She's risking a lot just by whispering those words here. It's unlikely she will be overheard, but if someone does, the words will implicate her in treason. Noble or not, she will not survive such a thing.

“You've been telling me that a rebellion is coming for a while. I'm still not sure I want to take part in something like that.”

She has assumed that I will stand against the emperor because of what I am, that I will do what she wants, but I'm not sure if I can risk it.

“Don't you hate him?”

She demands. “Don't you hate the whole system of Aetheria?”

I can't deny that, but it doesn't mean I share her priorities. "At the moment, I'm focused on getting my freedom and getting Alaric safe."

“Then you aren't thinking big enough,”

Lady Elara replies. “This isn't just about the two of you but about every beast whisperer in the empire. People will rise up. They're ready to come together, but they need the right symbol. They need you.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

I ask. “What exactly would my role be in all of this?”

“For one thing, I want you to rally the gladiators to our cause,”

she says. “They are held here, but they are some of the most powerful warriors in the empire, at the peak of their training and conditioning. Your guards can hold one or two of you in if you try to escape, but if you all act together...”

“You're acting as if I could even persuade them,”

I say. “As if it would be easy to just get them all to do what I wanted. Most of them here are afraid of me, or hate me or both. Isn't it better to wait? One more season, and I will be free.”

“Free to do what?”

Lady Elara asks. She looks at me carefully. “What do you think will happen when, if, you earn your freedom? Do you think the emperor will just hand over Alaric? Do you think that you will be safe as a beast whisperer out in Aetheria? Currently, you are protected by being in the games, but the moment you're out there in the world, the emperor and his cronies will try to kill you.”

“If you haven't noticed, people have been trying to kill me anyway,”

I snap back. Throughout my time at Ironhold, I have been handed difficult matchups, designed to test me to my limits, or just to kill me outright. Last season, an assassin got into Ironhold specifically to target me. The idea that I'm safe here is ludicrous.

“But they can't just have you killed directly,”

Lady Elara says. “The emperor can give you difficult matchups but he can't just order you executed. Out in the world... he could just decide to send a squad of soldiers to murder you. And you wouldn't be in a position to affect things as easily. You would be outside, the way I am, not able to talk to people easily. You must use your one chance to persuade people here to join us.”

I wish it were that easy. I'm not even sure that I'm a part of her rebellion. She has taught me much about what it means to be a beast whisperer, but I never signed up to stage a coup. Especially not the kind of bloody rebellion she seems to want. My goal has always been to survive and become free.

“Think about it, that's all I'm asking,”

Lady Elara says. “If we change things you will be free anyway, and you will get a chance for revenge on all those who have put you here. If you stay here and try to work within the system, it will swallow you whole.”

She steps back from me, heading for the door. “Please just think about it.”

I know I will be able to do little else, but I’m still not sure if I can give her the commitment, or the answers, she wants. I must focus on my own freedom, on Alaric’s, and on the games that are coming up.

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“Lady Elara came to see you?”

Rowan says, as I spar with him in a practice room, trading blows with wooden weapons, each of us moving smoothly at this point. He sounds as though he can barely believe it. “She's not your patron anymore.”

He punctuates that with a flurry of blows that makes me give ground to dodge and deflect them all. I must be careful with my footing because this is a room with benches and ramps set at odd angles, replicating some of the ways in which the arena floor might be turned into an obstacle course.

“She took advantage of the fact that I don't have a patron at the moment to bribe her way in here to see me,”

I say, thrusting at him with my wooden spear so that he can't advance so quickly, even as I leap up onto one of the benches. It's safer to be off the ground with Rowan, since he can manipulate the earth beneath my feet.

Rowan frowns at that. Our wooden weapons clash, and there seems to be a little more force behind his blows.

“She keeps wanting to see you. She's willing to bribe her way in, just to do it. Does she really want you that much?”

He sounds jealous.

“It isn't like that,”

I say, even as I dodge aside from the swing of his sword. Because I'm on a beam it's harder to do than usual, but my body has become well trained through my time in Ironhold. I have the balance to keep from falling even as I lean back to avoid the blow.

“Then what is it like?”

Rowan demands. “Because as far as I can see, the nobles are all the same.”

“Lady Elara has a bigger purpose,”

I say. “She wants to change the whole city.”

I'm not sure I can say more than that now because doing so would put Rowan in danger and expose too much of Lady Elara's plan. I need to convince him, but first, I need to convince myself. I don't want to tell him the whole thing if I'm going to turn around and refuse to take part in it. My focus is still on getting my freedom, ensuring that Alaric is free, and only then thinking about the situation of the city. Ultimately, the empire feels too big for someone like me to change.

Rowan chooses that moment to attack again, striking while I'm still leaning out of the way of his last blow, swinging low so I must lift a leg to avoid his attack. He pushes me with his shield even as I do so, sending me tumbling to the ground. He stands over me then moving close to me, his wooden sword across my throat.

“You need to keep your focus,”

he says. “All of this sounds like a distraction. Remember where you are and what we are. We need to concentrate on getting out of here, and for you that just means one more season.”

He's close to me now, his weight holding me down. I try to attack him with my spear and weighted chain, but he pins my arms. For a moment, we are so close, just inches apart, with both of us sweating and breathing hard. In so many other moments like this before, I would have been tempted to kiss him. Yet I'm surprised to find that, although there is still attraction there between us, although I can still appreciate the defined muscles of his torso above me, I don't want this moment to go any further. My thoughts are only of Alaric.

“You've made your point,”

I say, squirming out from under him. He looks briefly disappointed, but doesn't say anything. I guess he knows that my heart belongs to another now.

“I hope so, Lyra, for your sake. You only have one more set of games to go before you're free, but that means they will throw more at you. The emperor and the people who work for him don't want you to succeed. They would rather you had a glorious death than emerge triumphant.”

He's right, and it makes me wonder even more if I should go along with anything that Lady Elara is saying. I know that she has plans for both the city and for me, but it seems that I would be putting myself in a much more dangerous situation by trying to build support for her cause inside the games than if I simply completed my time in them and focused on saving Alaric. Does the empire have to fall now? Does the emperor have to be replaced now?

And is that all she intends? I can't help but think about her last words, about the possibility of getting revenge. I'm not sure I want to see what a beast whisperer bent on revenge might do.

Rowan and I finish our practice session, heading back to the main areas of the fortress. We are on our way to the dining hall when we hear a bell that is typically

only wrong to announce the arrival of new gladiators. It is a summons for all of us, I demand that we attend the gates.

Rowan and I head there even though I have no wish to see a new group of gladiators put through their paces. I have already seen it too many times, with people forced to run, to strike wooden posts with blunted weapons, to lift rocks and perform physical exercises until they are ready to drop. The test is always the same: those who stop or who collapse are dragged to the side to be sold in Aetheria's markets. Ironhold wants only the people with the determination to keep going.

Even though I don't want to watch any of this, I go to the gates of the fortress. Other gladiators are standing around, waiting for whatever new arrivals there will be. But as the gates open there is only a single figure coming through, surrounded by guards.

Alaric.

He is manacled, and there is a leather dampener on his wrist, the same as on mine. The difference is I suspect that no one will have tampered with his to allow him his powers. His mastery over illusion has been stolen from him.

The soldiers beside him look at him with contempt, but they also stare out at us with fear, as if knowing that this is a dangerous moment, surrounded by so many gladiators.

Lord Darius steps out in front of us all. He clearly rang the bell so that we would see this moment and understand everything that is happening to Alaric.

"All of you look at this prisoner,"

he says. "Alaric Blackthorn has been one of the greatest gladiators of the games. His family are among the foremost nobles of Aetheria. But that changes nothing."

A cold thread of fear runs through me at those words. I think I know what Lord Darius is about to announce, and if he announces that Alaric is to be taken to the parapets and impaled, I will not allow it. I will set every creature in Ironhold against these people. I will fight all of them even though I know I have little chance of succeeding.

I feel Rowan's hand on my shoulder. Is it a coincidence that his fingers touch the brand there, in a silent reminder that Lord Darius has the magic to burn the flesh of his foes with only the effort of concentration?

“Alaric Blackthorn killed a fellow gladiator of Ironhold, outside of the confines of a bout. He tried to argue that he was only acting in the defense of another, and I'm sure there are those among you who have sympathy with that argument. It is one of the reasons that it has taken so long to make a decision about this. But the emperor has decreed that even that does not excuse such a death here. It is one of our most important rules, crucial to keeping order within this place. And so, the emperor has decided that Alaric will pay the ultimate price for it.”

I pull against the strength of Rowan's grip, but he holds me in place. I see Alaric look around, and his eyes find mine. He looks so sad and broken for an instant there, but then it's as if he collects himself, bringing his face under control in the kind of mask of arrogant indifference that he always presents to the world. In some ways, that hurts even worse, because I know it's the only thing he has left to keep people from seeing how afraid and alone he is.

I start to gather my power. I don't care that Rowan is holding me back. If they are going to take Alaric to the walls to kill him they will find themselves facing an army of beasts.

A part of me notes that Lord Darius has said that the emperor has declared that Alaric will die, when it is Selene Ravenscroft who is the arch magistrate of the empire. Has

the emperor imposed his authority above her decisions within the law? If so, why? Is it just more evidence of his madness and cruelty, or is there some purpose to it?

Lord Darius takes a breath and keeps going. "It has been decreed that Alaric will not die here as is traditional. Instead, he will meet his fate at the conclusion of the next round of games. He will be executed in the colosseum, so that everyone might see it."

The master of Ironhold keeps any hint of disapproval out of his voice. He is normally a stickler for tradition, but he also won't criticize the emperor.

"In the time between now and then, he will be held in Ironhold, and all of you will reflect on his punishment. You will not seek to speak with him, to contact him, to even look upon his face. If you do you will invite punishment of your own, determined by the emperor himself. You have been warned."

I feel certain he's looking my way as he says it.

I don't know what to think as the guards take Alaric away, leading him into the depths of the fortress. I feel devastated by the announcement of his impending execution. A part of me wants to rush after the guards and take them on at once, slaying them to free Alaric.

Another part is thinking in terms of other possibilities. I do not have time now to achieve my own freedom and then argue for his. I do not have time in which to build slowly towards life and hope for both of us. Instead, I must find a way to act immediately. To free us before the conclusion of the games.

I think about the creatures down in the depths of Ironhold. I want to rush to the beast pens now. My mind is already filling with wild schemes of burrowing creatures that can reach his cell, monstrous things that can tear the bars from it. With my powers, I want to believe that I can find a way to free Alaric and get him to safety.

But I am also not so foolish as to believe that any of these wild ideas can actually succeed. I have power, but Ironhold is designed to contain people with power. All my skills and talents count for nothing here. I cannot take on every guard at once. I cannot fight all of those patrolling the walls. Even if I could, what then? If we got beyond the fortress, the full might of Aetheria would be sent to hunt us down.

In spite of my power I am helpless in the face of this, and I hate the way that the empire has made me feel helpless again and again, from the first moments when soldiers claimed me in its name, all the way to this instance when I cannot simply save the man I care about so much.

In moments like this, I can understand Lady Elara's hatred for the empire.

But I can do one thing. Alaric is back in Ironhold, and that means that I can speak with him for the first time in what feels like forever. I do not care that it is forbidden. I do not care that Lord Darius has only just told us that we cannot seek contact with him.

I must speak with Alaric, and I will, whatever the cost, but I must also be careful about it, because I know I cannot afford to be caught.

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It's strange to think that once, I couldn't find my way around Ironhold. The fortress used to seem like an impenetrable maze to me, with too many twists and turns to ever make sense of. But now I've been here as long as any other gladiator. Only the trainers and people like Lord Darius have been here longer.

It is in the nature of the gladiators that none of us is here for very long. The seasons in the colosseum come and go, and we either succeed in making it to our five, or we die quickly. The brutality of the system means that there are no veterans here, no gladiators who have been inside the games forever. We are tested and either given to the city as nobles or slain.

I probably know the interior of the fortress as well as any gladiator at this point, not least because I have explored it through other eyes. I have seen it through the eyes of the mice who scurry down its corridors. I have explored the strange scents of the place through noses far finer than any human's. I have seen it through eyes that can perceive no color, and eyes that perceive a spectrum beyond anything I have seen before.

It means I am able to find a route through it, heading into the depths, looking for Alaric.

I search him out using my powers. I cannot sense him the way I would with a beast but I can borrow the eyes of the rats and the spiders in the darkest dungeon depths, looking for him that way. I see him sitting on the edge of a bed in a cell with a door whose bars let in only a flicker of light from the corridor beyond.

I try to read his expressions through the sight of the mouse crouched in the corner,

but even here it seems as though Alaric puts up a mask to the world, determined not to show his emotions. He is whistling pointedly, nonchalantly, as if hoping that any guard listening will not believe that he is afraid. He makes it seem as if he doesn't care, when I have seen enough of the real heart of him to know that he will care very much indeed.

There are many guards around the fortress even if there is only one making sure that Alaric does not flee. I think about his cell as I make my way down towards it, moving quietly, checking every corner for the possibility that someone might be waiting for me around it. He has not been confined to luxurious quarters this time. His nobility counts for nothing.

Or maybe it does; a slave gladiator would probably have been killed out of hand. He got a trial, and I suspect that the only reason he has been condemned is because of the interference of the emperor.

Why would the emperor interfere? That question runs through my head as I walk, tension filling me with every sound, every hint of movement in the shadows.

Why would he condemn the son of one of his highest born nobles, and one of the most popular gladiators in the games? It is another decision that seems confusing, even mad from him. Certainly, it is cruel, because Alaric should get some leniency based simply on the fact that he was trying to save me. If he hadn't killed Callus, I would be dead now. There was no way to stop the assassin short of killing him.

I hold myself still in an alcove, waiting for the guard to pass me on his rounds. I hold my breath as he moves past me, then connect with another rat a little way away. I see a mop and bucket nearby and I use the rat to push them over, the clatter of them as they fall audible even back where I stand.

I hear the guard curse and he goes to check on the disturbance, one hand on the sword

at his belt, as if expecting rogue gladiators to jump out at him at any moment. I watch him go, not daring to move from my hiding place until he is out of sight.

The moment he is, however, I hurry in the direction of Alaric's cell. I know I will not have long.

“Alaric!”

I call out to him, not really daring to raise my voice in case the guard hears me.

“Alaric, it's me!”

There is a pause and the sound of metal moving as Alaric moves towards the door in his chains. I hate that they have chained him as well as putting him in this place. It is an additional indignity that he does not require. The cell alone should be enough to hold him, but they have put manacles on him as if to remind him of just how perilous his position is.

“Lyra, what are you doing here?”

he asks as he makes it to the door. His features look drawn and pale. It is obvious he has not been well treated in the run-up to his trial, and my guess is that no one has fed him properly. No one wants to waste food on a condemned man.

“I wanted to see you,”

I say. “I needed to see you.”

“This is the last place you should want to see me,”

Alaric replies. “I can hardly be my brilliant best here.”

He flashes a smile, but there's something false about it. The whole thing is an act, presumably for my benefit, so that he doesn't show me just how hurt he is by all of this.

“It's so wrong that they're doing this to you,”

I say. “You shouldn't be executed for something like this.”

I hear him sigh. “Ultimately, those are the rules of Ironhold. They kept them brutally simple. No questions about who was defending themselves from whom, who provoked whom, no excuses. I guess otherwise they would spend half their time trying to sort through exactly why one gladiator killed another, and this place would be chaos.”

How can he make excuses for the people who have condemned him to die? For the system that allows no room for mercy or nuance? I am not the one in the cell and even so I cannot tolerate it.

“It shouldn't be like this,” I insist.

“Well, no,”

he says. “I should be out in the middle of the arena, performing for the crowds, while beautiful noble women swoon at my feet.”

“Only noble women?” I say.

He raises an eyebrow. “Why, can you think of anyone else who might be interested in me?”

I reach through the bars for him, wanting to pull him to me to kiss him, to show him

that I have not forgotten him, and that I will do everything I can to get him out of here.

But he pulls back before I can do it.

“You shouldn't be here, Lyra. It's dangerous for you.”

“If you mean the guard, I've distracted him,” I say.

“I don't just mean that. You're right, ordinarily someone in a situation like this would be shown leniency. Especially a noble. During my trial, I got the feeling that the arch magistrate wanted to acquit me, or at least let me off with nothing more than some token punishment.”

I briefly shudder at the thought of that because I know there is nothing token about the punishments handed out at Ironhold. I have suffered some of them, and they have been brutal. But it's what I thought would happen, that, at most, Alaric would suffer a harsh whipping and then be allowed to continue as a gladiator.

“But the emperor interfered,” I say.

Alaric nods. “And he's doing it for a reason. It could just be to make an example of me or because he's in a cruel mood. The gods know that he's unpredictable enough, but I don't think that's it. I don't even think this is about me. I heard him mention you, Lyra. He knows we're close. How could he not when I killed someone to save you?”

The emperor knows that Alaric and I are together, which means he believes that Alaric is a way to get to me. All of a sudden I find myself agreeing with Alaric: coming down here was not a good idea. If anything, it's exactly what the emperor wanted me to do.

“So you see, you need to go,”

Alaric says, his voice filled with urgency. “You need to go and just forget about me. Your attachment to me is what makes this situation valuable to them. They will try to use it against you. Go, Lyra.”

“I’ll go but there’s no way I’m going to forget about you,”

I say. “And there’s no way I’m just going to leave you to die.”

“There’s nothing you can do,”

Alaric says. He sounds far too resigned to his fate.

I don’t believe that. I won’t believe that.

Even so, I must go. I hurry away from Alaric’s cell, fear propelling me. I head back along the route leading into the rest of the fortress. I’ve barely come to the first turning when I hear booted feet coming the other way. I try to look for somewhere to hide, but there is nowhere.

Lord Darius comes around the corner, accompanied by at least half a dozen guards, all the ones who should have been guarding Alaric. But now I realize that the point wasn’t to guard him but to trap me. Lord Darius tried to warn me away, but at the same time he knew exactly what I would do. He knew I would come and try to help Alaric, that I would disobey his command in this, the emperor’s command.

“You were told not to come here, Lyra,”

he says. “Now, you will pay the price of that. The emperor requires your presence.”

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They march me down into the city in chains the way they might have a prisoner, and the worst part is that I am almost used to such treatment by now. It has been done to me before, the chains used to make a spectacle of me, to show that I am weak compared to the power of the emperor, and that even the strongest gladiators of the arena can be controlled at his whim.

There are no crowds lining the streets as there would be on the days of the games, which means that I get to see people about their normal lives as I pass through the city, flanked by guards. Most of their lives are just ordinary. There are store holders calling out their wares, children running in the street, wives and servants at the markets.

And there are signs of unrest here and there. I see a couple of burnt-out houses with graffiti daubed on them condemning the empire. I see the spot where a man has been impaled, a sign around his neck proclaiming that he is a traitor. Even as I pass with the guards, I see a couple of men pausing as they beat someone in an alleyway, turning and running at the sight of the imperial soldiers.

Aetheria feels as lawless now as it is beautiful, although that beauty is mostly confined to the richer areas, with their statues and their white marble houses, their liberal use of magic to decorate their homes. Since this is not one of the holy days on which the games operate in the colosseum, there are not the usual depictions of the favored gladiators slaying their enemies. Instead, houses are adorned with elaborate symbols that reflect each family's lineages and magical prowess.

People recognize me as the guards march me through the streets. They know my face in the way that they might not know those of half the nobles in Aetheria. My face is

one that has been displayed in those magical images, showing my moments of victory. I have fought for their entertainment, they have cheered and booed me.

They stare at me now. Some of them look on with fear or distaste, but more of them look at me with awe, or with love. I see a small child standing with her mother, pointing my way and jumping up and down excitedly.

Some of them look confused by my chains, as if wondering what it is I've done to deserve this. They still don't understand that I don't need to have done anything. The emperor can do this to me at any time, even if this instance was sparked by me failing to follow his commands.

Fear rises in me at that thought, at the question of what he might command to be done to me for disobeying.

I can feel the eyes of the crowd on me as we move through into progressively more expensive neighborhoods. There are no signs of destruction or unrest here. This is not the part of the city where people starve, or must fight for every scrap.

The imperial palace lies ahead. It is grand in a way that makes it clear it was designed primarily to exert the authority of the empire to every glance, to show anyone looking that this is the heart of the empire, and thus the world.

Every step towards it is a step closer to punishment for me.

Mighty columns hold up its roof. Gilded statues line the way to its doors. Beyond the walls surrounding it, there are gardens, tended with care by gardeners who have magical talents suited to it. I see one reshaping a tree with a touch, another coaxing a dying plant back into life with healing magic.

The symbol of the empire is everywhere: a sword bursting through a purple corona of

magical power. It is carved into the stonework, displayed on banners. It is a reminder of both the military might of the empire and the magical power on which the emperors' claims to the throne of Aetheria rest. We gladiators are also an embodiment of that power, but are treated with far less honor.

The guards lead me to the palace, taking me through the magnificent gardens tended by gardeners whose magic keeps the flowers healthy and blooming. There are creatures here, ranging from butterflies larger than my head to unicorns prancing on one of the lawns and razor-clawed cats kept in a cage. It is the kind of place that displays the power and wealth of the emperor because no one else could afford to keep such things so close to him. His menagerie displays creatures from across the empire, but also chimeras created by magic, showing both the reach of the Aetherian Empire and the power that flows up from beneath the city.

My heart is beating faster with every step. The emperor is waiting for me in a receiving room that appears to be open to the garden, but a faint shimmer in the air makes it clear that it is not. He is a lean man in his fifties, his dark hair thinning, his eyes a strange purple that seems to reflect the color of the robes he wears as he stands at a table, looking over a map.

Without the grandeur of his surroundings, he would look ordinary, but he is anything but that. He has all the power of his position, but also deadly, powerful magic.

The emperor waves a hand almost casually and the faint shimmer in the air fades for a moment or two. Long enough at least for the guards to push me through, standing between them in the receiving room before the emperor.

I remember just in time that I meant to kneel in the presence of the emperor, so I fall to my knees, waiting for him to react to my presence.

“That will be all,”

he says to the guards.

They leave, and I'm alone with the emperor. That is a thought that does nothing to quell the sense of fear rising in me. He still doesn't look at me. He has a gilded throne set so he can look out over the garden but he's not sitting in it for now. He's still busy looking over the maps at the table.

“Come here,”

he commands.

I stand and join him at the table. I'm surprised by the casualness of it, when I have been brought here in chains. Those chains are still around my wrists, so that even if the emperor is being briefly friendly, I cannot forget my situation.

“What do you see?”

he asks, gesturing to the maps.

I stare down at them. The central one is a map of the city, but there are others around it, showing different parts of the empire. There is a large map of the empire as a whole at one side. It is such a small thing to represent such a vast space.

“I see the empire,”

I say, not understanding.

“Do you know what I see when I look at this?”

the emperor asks.

“No, my emperor,”

I reply. I understand that there is some purpose to bringing me here, some point to all of this, but I cannot see it.

“I see a complex web of things fitting together. I see a whole system designed to make this city the greatest one in the world. Goods and people flow in from places so far off you will not even have heard of them, and yet those places belong to me. In theory I have power over more of the world than any other man who has ever lived, because my army has done its job and expanded the borders. And yet there is only one map here that matters.”

“The map of the city?” I guess.

He looks my way for an extended period for the first time. “Exactly. Everything else is for the benefit of Aetheria. And yet, it is here that we have problems. If you are here, it's because you tried to see Alaric Blackthorn, correct?”

There is no point in denying it. “Yes.”

“The young nobleman who killed someone to save you. He must care deeply about you.”

The emperor looks me up and down. “If he weren't willing to give up his life for you I'd assume that he just wants your body, but a noble man can buy a dozen such as you at any market.”

He throws the insult my way casually. I do my best not to react to it. The emperor seems to delight in small cruelties, reminding me whenever he can that I am not a citizen and that I am not free.

“So, he must care for you. And do you care for him, Lyra?”

I hesitate, not because I'm unsure about my feelings about Alaric, but because I'm unsure what the outcome will be if I admit them to the emperor. I realize, however, that I have no choice. This is my one chance to save Alaric's life. I am in front of the one person who has the power to intercede on his behalf. The emperor can snap his fingers, and a dozen guards will leap to free Alaric.

“I do,” I admit.

“And yet you don't seem to be pleading for his life.”

“Please, my emperor, let him live. He only acted to defend me against an assassin you sent me back to face.”

“It hardly sounds like pleading when you're blaming me,”

Emperor Tiberius says. “Perhaps you aren't serious about saving his life.”

I hate that he's toying with me like this, seeing what I will and won't do to try to save Alaric from his fate.

“Please,”

I beg. “Just let him live. I'll do anything you want.”

I know only too well what “anything”

could entail. He could make me fight for him or kill for him. He could command me to his bed. He could send me against his enemies. The possibilities are terrifying, but if it will keep Alaric safe, I will do anything that is required.

The emperor shrugs. “But you are a slave, and I am the emperor. You will do anything I want anyway. I hold your life in my hands as easily as his. I could give you a command and you would have to follow it whatever it was. Shall I think of something for you to do to prove it?”

It is all too easy to think of the many ways the emperor might prove the difference in our positions to me. He could have me flayed alive on a whim. He could command me to his bed. He could set me to some menial task and leave me doing it for hours. He is no longer my patron, but he is still in a position of authority over me.

At least for now. It occurs to me that another season of games in the colosseum is coming up and if I survive it, I will be free. I will be a free citizen of Aetheria, a noble, and the emperor will not be able to command as much from me. I will have rights as well as just duties.

I'm starting to see the shape of what's happening here. I think I understand some of the game the emperor is playing.

“You want something,” I say.

The emperor's eyes narrow, with a flicker of anger. “Do not presume to know my mind.”

But I think I do when it comes to this. I think I understand why all of this is happening the way it is.

“You intervened personally to make sure that Alaric would be given a sentence of execution,”

I say, “but it wasn't carried out immediately, and it could have been. It would have been with most other people.”

“He is noble born, and an example must be made.”

“But if that were enough to change things, he wouldn't be executed at all,”

I say. “Instead, you've made sure that the threat of death is hanging over him. Hanging over someone you know I care about.”

I'm starting to see why Alaric has said in the past that it is dangerous to be seen to care about anyone in Ironhold. That there is always someone trying to use it against us. I just never dreamed that it would be the emperor.

The emperor smiles. “If you've worked out that much, then surely you've worked out enough to know that you should be on your knees, begging to do what I wish.”

He stares at me, and I know he's serious. I fall to my knees again, staring up at him and pleading as best I can.

“Please, please spare Alaric. I know you have something you want me to do and whatever it is I will do it if you will only let him live. Please just don't execute him. Let him go.”

“There. I knew you could beg properly if you tried.”

He looks pleased with himself as he gestures to the map. “As I said before, the problem is Aetheria. Specifically how unruly it has become. It seems that there are disturbances almost every day now. I want you to help with that, Lyra.”

“Help how?” I ask.

“You are the favorite gladiator of the people at the moment,”

the emperor says. “Your presence in the games entertains them and keeps them from rising up. But you will only be there for one more set of games. We can't have that.”

“You want... you want me to keep fighting?” I say.

The emperor nods. “Exactly. You will fight in the Colosseum until I decide that you have done enough. You will keep fighting in it past your five seasons. When you do so, you will entertain the crowd, and you will kill when I command it. You will give them reasons to be pacified and docile. If you do that, Alaric Blackthorn will live. As long as you keep living and fighting, he will live a life of luxury here within my own palace. If you fail me, I will enact his sentence.”

I realize the trap the emperor has laid for me and worse, just how little choice I have in the matter. Or rather, I have a choice, but it is not one I am willing to make. I could ignore this offer, could get through my five seasons and leave, but only if I'm willing to sacrifice Alaric's life. To watch him executed at the conclusion of this season. I'm not. Which means I have only one option.

I bow my head. “I will do what you require.”

The emperor smiles. “I know you will. Oh, and one more thing...”

“Yes, my emperor?”

“It's obvious now that you have more of a connection to the groups acting against me than I believed.”

“I don't understand,” I say.

“Do not lie to me,”

the emperor snaps. "It's clearly not a coincidence that your latest sponsor was slain by creatures. Only a beast whisperer could do that, and you are hardly one of those anymore."

He still believes that my dampener prevents me from using any of my powers. I look at him, not saying anything.

"As it happens, I don't believe that Lady Emin is that great a loss. She was a plotter in her own way, the same as her daughter. When I allowed her to be your sponsor, I assumed that either she would be grateful for the chance to crush you, or something like this would happen. I've benefited either way. In this case because your beast whisperer friends have shown their hand."

"I don't have any beast whisperer friends,"

I lie. I cannot let him find out about Lady Elara and her plans.

The emperor gives me a stern look. "I told you not to lie to me. And I hope that for your sake it is a lie. You have a connection to them. I suppose I could have you tortured to find out everything, but it is easier to just use you, now that I have Alaric Blackthorn. You have a connection. You will use that connection. You will help me to crush them. If you do that... then I might be inclined to free both you and Alaric."

I kneel there, shocked by what he's suggesting. He wants me to betray Lady Elara, the spectral covenant, and everyone working with them.

"But you don't have to reply to that one at once,"

the emperor says. "Take the time to think it over. Realize the reality of your position. If I get bored with you taking too long, then I can always have you tortured after all. Now go, and remember that even if I'm not your patron anymore, I own you."

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I don't know what to do as I make my way back to Ironhold. I had thought that the emperor was done with me, but it's clear that he will never be done with me. He will never let me go, will never let me simply be free.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that I'm trapped by my own power and fame. If I were any other gladiator, if I had any other power, the emperor would not be interfering in my life like this, would not be using the people I love against me. He would not care.

But then, if I were not a beast whisperer, perhaps I would not have survived this long. I have seen skilled, strong fighters killed in the colosseum. People with powers that seem deadlier at first glance than my own. They have not made it to their five seasons, but have died instead on the sand for the entertainment of the people of the city.

An old, familiar hatred rises up inside me with that thought, and I had never thought that I would hate anything until the imperial soldiers took me to be a slave gladiator here in Aetheria. It is hatred for the entire way the empire is run. For the emperor, certainly, but also for the system of the games, for the fact that so many die for so little reason.

And now I have promised the emperor that I will help it all continue. With my performances I will pacify the crowd and help to keep the city under control. It is the exact opposite of everything Lady Elara wants from me. But if I do not do it, then what? Alaric will die. He is a hostage now against my good behavior.

The guards take me back to the fortress, removing my manacles and leaving me there

in the practice yard. Almost as soon as they do so, Rowan hurries up to me.

“Lyra, are you all right? I heard that the guards had taken you. Lord Darius announced it to the rest of us to make it clear that we weren't to try to get to Alaric.”

He sounds terrified that something horrible must have happened to me.

“I'm fine,”

I say automatically, but then pause. “No, I don't think I am fine. They took me to the emperor.”

“What did he do?”

Rowan asks, looking afraid for me. Looking at me, too, as if searching for fresh injuries. The emperor has hurt me before to prove that he can.

“He made me beg for Alaric's life,” I say.

Rowan frowns. “That doesn't sound so bad. Although I'm sure he found ways to make it worse.”

I sigh, leading Rowan off into a secluded part of the practice grounds. I take up a wooden weapon from a rack of them, striking a post half-heartedly so that it doesn't look like we're doing anything other than simply working out together.

“He made me promise that I would stay in the games after my five seasons,”

I say. “That I will continue to be a gladiator, and fight to entertain the crowds.”

Rowan looks horrified by that prospect. “But he can't do that.”

“He's the emperor,”

I point out.

Rowan shakes his head as if it is too much for even the emperor to demand.

“Even the emperor can't force you to keep fighting,”

Rowan says. “The colosseum is the heart of Aetheria. Its traditions are so ancient and embedded that even the emperor can't really go against them. To do that... it would cause uproar, maybe even unrest.”

Which is presumably why Lady Elara thinks that I can make a difference from within it. It's also why the emperor needs my agreement, however unwilling, for this part.

“Which is why he got me to agree to it, rather than simply commanding it,” I say.

“You agreed to keep fighting in the colosseum?”

Rowan doesn't sound any less shocked than he was before. “Why would you do that?”

“Because the emperor has agreed that he will not have Alaric executed as long as I keep fighting and winning to entertain the crowd.”

Rowan shakes his head. He reaches out to take me by the shoulders. “Do you think that's what Alaric would want, Lyra? You are buying him a reprieve, but not his freedom, and to do it you're placing your own life at risk. The emperor plans to keep you fighting until you finally die in there.”

“Then I need to keep from dying,”

I say, trying to sound more confident than I am about my odds.

“I don't care how well you've done so far,”

Rowan says. “No one can be lucky all the time, and it only takes one thrust of a weapon at the wrong moment for you to die.”

“Do you think I don't know that?”

I say. I can't keep the hurt out of my voice. I know the situation I'm in.

Rowan tilts his head to one side. “I'm not sure if you do. You're acting as though you're invincible, but now you don't even have your powers to help you.”

I lower my voice even further. What I'm about to tell him puts us both in danger, along with Selene Ravenscroft. It gives Rowan a measure of power over me that I wouldn't give to anyone else in here except Alaric.

“I still have my powers,”

I whisper to him. “Selene Ravenscroft adjusted my dampener. I have full access to all the powers of a beast whisperer.”

Rowan's eyes widen at that, perhaps as much because of the involvement of the arch magistrate as because I have my powers back.

“That's...”

I can see him thinking about it. “That's so dangerous for you, Lyra. If you slip even once and people think that you have your powers back... you could be executed.”

“I have some leeway, I think,”

I say. “After all, my dampener was meant to limit my power, not cut me off from it completely. It only cut me off from my powers completely after it was tampered with the first time. People expect me to have at least some power.”

“But the emperor still won't react well if you start summoning creatures to your aid,”

Rowan says. I'm worried now about having told him because it's obvious he's not going to let this go, and there's a chance that someone else will overhear us.

“Which is why I'll be discreet,” I say.

“And when you can't be?”

Rowan counters. “When it's a choice between doing something spectacular and being killed on the sands? If you're going to fight there forever, do you really think you'll never be in a situation where you need to use your full powers? Do you think that even with them you can survive everything?”

“I must try,”

I say. “Alaric's life depends upon it.”

“Do you think he'd want you to let yourself be controlled by the emperor like this?”

Rowan asks again.

“Is it so different from the power Lady Tyra has over you because she still controls your sisters?”

I say. It's a low blow, but I need to make him see my position.

Rowan's expression darkens, possibly because he knows I have a point. We are both in situations where others have control of the ones we love, and that means they can make us do what they want.

"There's a difference,"

he insists. "Two more seasons, and I will be out of here. Just two more and I will be able to take a place as a free citizen of Aetheria. I will be able to get a position where I can work to free my sisters."

I shake my head. "Do you really think that Lady Tyra will ever let them go if it means that she has power over you? Has she commanded you to her bed yet?"

"She..."

Rowan looks almost sick. "She wants me to go to her at the end of these games, to 'celebrate'. She says it will go badly for my sisters if I don't."

"Then you understand the position I'm in," I say.

Rowan shakes his head. "It's still not the same. Alaric chose to enter the games, and he chose to kill Callus, knowing what it might mean for him. And... Lady Tyra is not a fate that leads to my death."

"You really believe that I can't survive, don't you?" I say.

Rowan steps back from me, setting aside his weapons, and gestures for me to follow him. I leave my weapons and do so, heading with him through to the dining hall. There, I see some of my fellow gladiators gathered around the chalkboard at one end.

I realize that, while I have been with the emperor, the pairings for the next set of games have gone up. There are matches marked up there for me although the names are absent as usual because Lord Darius and Lady Selene don't know who will be alive from round to round.

But my first matchup is there. I frown at the sight of Aya's name. The large gladiator is new, and so shouldn't be as much of a threat as Rowan is implying. Then I see the markings beside the match. This is to be a blindfolded match, the same as those that Rowan has taken part in previously. Only I don't have his knack for feeling the vibrations of the earth to know where my opponent is.

"You see,"

Rowan says in a low voice. "They are giving you dangerous matchups. Aya has some of the same talent I do. She can feel the vibrations of the earth the same way. She will know where you are."

"And I can see her,"

I reply. "I can look through the eyes of birds."

"And that will make it obvious that you still have your powers,"

Rowan counters.

This is a difficult, dangerous situation. Worse, it proves that I am to be pushed to my limits now. And if I stay in the games, it will simply happen again and again until I cannot handle it and I'm killed.

What other options do I have, though? I can think of at least one.

“There are... forces building against the empire,”

I whisper to Rowan. “Maybe I'm exactly where I need to be. Maybe I can use this to my advantage by giving them information about the emperor and the games. Maybe I can persuade the other gladiators to join them.”

That's what Lady Elara wants me to do, and if I succeed, maybe the uprising against the emperor will have enough fighters to succeed.

“You're talking about treason,”

Rowan points out.

“I'm talking about maybe being free,”

I counter. “A wave of rebellion rising up to free us all.”

Rowan shakes his head, though. “You can't do this, Lyra. You can't be this selfish.”

“What's selfish about trying to change everything for the better?” I demand.

“The moment there's any kind of uprising, Lady Tyra will take my sisters away as far as she can. I will never see them again. And that's without the chaos such a thing will bring. How many people will die?”

“If the uprising succeeds-”

“Who's running it?”

Rowan demands.

I shake my head. "I can't tell you that."

It would put Lady Elara in too much danger. It would endanger Rowan, too. Just having the information would leave him vulnerable. I'm sure the emperor would kill to get that knowledge.

"But it's someone noble right?"

Rowan guesses. "My guess is that it's that noblewoman who was your patron, Lady Elara."

I don't reply, but he goes on as if I've confirmed it.

"Which means that this isn't a revolution, Lyra, it's just a coup. Someone else is setting themselves up to become emperor, or maybe empress."

The way he says that suggests that he's guessed that Lady Elara might have a part in it.

"Even if they're a better person than Emperor Tiberius, that doesn't mean they have any incentive to change everything about the empire. It doesn't mean that all the slaves will suddenly be free. I can't risk that when my sisters are still in Lady Tyra's hands."

"But-"

"No,"

Rowan says, not giving me a chance to say anything else. "I don't want any part in this, and if you have any sense, you won't, either."

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I am dressed in my armor for the procession down into the city, patches of shining scale that leave much of my skin bare and catch the sunlight, along with vambraces on my arms.

My fellow gladiators walk in a motley crowd rather than in neat rows.

We are not soldiers, unlike those who guard us on the way.

The procession for the first day of the games is always a big occasion.

For many of the new gladiators, this is the first time they have been out of their fortress prison since they were first brought to Ironhold.

Even most of the more experienced ones will have been kept within its confines since the last games.

Only those with sponsors are allowed out, and only then to visit the nobles who have paid for the privilege.

Our route winds down into Aetheria, twisting and turning away from the black granite of the fortress and towards the white marble buildings of the city.

It is a route that takes us first through the slums beyond the walls, then through into the wealthier areas.

The crowds have come out in force to watch us as we head down towards the heart of Aetheria.

Young and old, rich and poor, they're all there.

We remain the greatest spectacle in the city, especially on this first day when the beasts for the games are being brought along with us.

Creatures are carried in cages on carts or dragged along while trainers control them with chains.

I think about how easy it would be to take control of those creatures now that I have my powers back.

How easy it would be to set them on the soldiers around us so that all of the gladiators could escape at once.

But that is not Lady Elara's plan, she wants to wait until later in the games, and it would do nothing to save Alaric.

He is not here, and in some ways that is more heartbreaking than the rest of it.

He was to have been free by now.

If he had come through the last games successfully rather than being dragged away to a cell, he would have been a free noble by now.

He might even have been standing in this crowd to watch.

But my thoughts of him are of the way he would always drink in the adulation of the crowd, playing up to them, waving and performing for them as he walked.

Not like Rowan, who continues to do his best to ignore the crowd, treating this whole occasion as something to get through rather than something to fully participate in.

I wave and smile because I have been told by Lady Elara that it is vital for the crowd to love me.

I know her plan is to use me to be the spark for her rebellion, but now Rowan's words are swimming around in my head.

What if her rebellion does succeed? Will she free everyone, or will she just rampage through the city then set herself on the throne? She is a beast whisperer yes, but she is also a noble woman, and her plan seems to call just for the replacement of the emperor.

Things might improve for my fellow beast whisperers but it seems that the rest of Aetherian society will stay the same, or even suffer more, if she really does want revenge.

Maybe I'm doing her a disservice though, and not knowing it makes the decision I have to make that much harder.

Around us the crowds cheer, calling out our names, with different groups of fans competing to shout their favored gladiator's name the loudest.

“Lyra! Lyra! Lyra!”

Mine rings out among the rest. No, it is louder than the rest now. The other gladiators who might have been as popular are gone. Vex, who treated all the adulation as simply his birthright, has finished his time in the games. Alaric is imprisoned. Ravenna, who seemed ready to seduce half the crowd, is dead. So many gladiators are dead. I am left as the most popular of the ones still in the games. No wonder the emperor wishes to use me and keep me there.

There are other names being called. A few shout for Rowan, mostly young women

who seem eager to catch his eye, not that it does much good. But there are people calling for gladiators who are newer to the games than I am. A few call Cesca's name, and she seems to sway and dance before them, as if remembering the way that Ravenna used to attract attention.

"Death to the emperor!"

someone calls out. A couple of guards plunge into the crowd, but whoever shouted it is lost among the rest of them. The rest of the crowd backs away in fear as they barge forward, as if suspecting that anyone unlucky enough to get in their way will earn themselves a beating.

The signs of unrest I saw before are mostly gone, but it's hard to disguise the burnt out houses. They have been decorated instead, festooned with banners and decorations along with the rest of the streets, as if the sheer exuberance of the occasion can outweigh the violence lurking beneath.

The city stands in contrast to the way it looked the other day. Now everything is decorated and bright, while magic uses illusion to show us images of ourselves in our fights. I appear in several such images now, shining out above the crowd.

Aya glares at me as I walk, obviously mentally preparing herself for the fight we're going to have. She wanders closer.

"I'm going to crush you today,"

she says to me. "They're going to see me destroy you, and then all this fame that you've claimed for yourself is going to be mine."

"I wouldn't wish for it too much,"

I say, giving her a serious look. “Do you want some noble deciding they want to be your patron? To be able to give you commands whenever they want?”

She shrugs. “Better that than being ignored. And no one will ignore me after I kill you.”

“You can achieve as much just by giving the crowd a good show,”

I point out. “The fights are just until one of us is incapacitated.”

“So squeamish, suddenly? The last I heard, you were all too happy to kill some of your opponents. And the crowd are going to get a show. I'm going to break you slowly.”

She seems so quick to make threats. I've done nothing to her, but in the colosseum, I don't need to have wronged her. It is enough that I stand between her and the glory she wants. Aya thinks that her life will be better if she is a well-known gladiator. I know I'm not going to be able to persuade her otherwise. All I can do is try to survive our bout.

The colosseum looms ahead. Every time I see it the grandeur of it sweeps me away. Even if it were not augmented with magic, it is still a massive structure, a circle of stone rising high above the city, with entrances set all around it and statues of famous gladiators set in niches so that an army of them seems to watch over the games.

The magic makes it more spectacular, with bursts of light and colored smoke flowing out to catch the attention of the crowd. Our procession heads up a main thoroughfare, flanked by statues, heading for the main gates that lead to the arena floor.

A wall of sound hits us as we walk in. As usual, the colosseum is packed. This is one of the few spaces where the ordinary citizens of Aetheria are crammed in alongside

the nobles. Well, not completely alongside. The nobles still have their grand boxes, where servants attend to them, while the lower orders must push through the stands to find places to watch. Hawkers are already selling food, and the betting booths are doing a brisk trade.

The emperor is waiting in his box, sitting on his throne there and waiting for our arrival. Our procession comes to a halt before him, the gladiators raising their fists in salute to him.

He stands. "Once more, we stand at the beginning of a set of holy days for our city. Never forget that the blood spilled on these sands forms part of a sacred rite, which gives meaning to your deaths as you feed the stones of Aetheria."

Are we supposed to be grateful that if we die, our magic will flow down into the stones from which magic pours out into the world?

I look around at the noble boxes. Lady Elara is in hers, but she is not the one who catches my eye. Alaric is sitting there in another, dressed in noble finery, although he is surrounded by guards, and I can still see the dampener on his wrist. He must have been taken from Ironhold last night. It seems the emperor is serious about giving him a fine life for as long as I am obedient.

The emperor's eyes sweep over our numbers. I can feel them locking onto me, a silent question in them. I still haven't given him an answer as to whether I will do everything he wishes. As to whether I will help him uncover those who plot against him.

It would be simpler to say no and just focus on fighting to keep Alaric alive, but the truth is that no one can win forever in the colosseum, and I cannot risk the emperor's anger. Maybe there is a way I can use this to my advantage but for now he has me caught. I must do what he requires, for my sake and for Alaric's.

I bow my head to the emperor, and to everyone watching it must look just like a mark of respect but I know he will understand what I mean by it. I'm saying yes, I will do what he has asked me.

After all, I have no choice.

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Because I am one of the most popular gladiators, I must wait for my first bout, sitting in the depths of the arena. I have my weapons now, and the trainers have surprised me by taking away my weighted chain, replacing it with a net, the weapon I used to wield. They have let me keep the spear, though, rather than giving me back a trident. They also pass me a small, curved dagger.

It is a combination I haven't been training with. It is similar to the weapons I have worked with, but even such a small difference can have an impact. It can take a small edge away from me, forcing me to think rather than simply react, and that might be the difference between life and death.

“I wasn't told I'd be fighting with different weapons,” I say.

“You don't need to be told,”

the trainer snaps back. “This is what I was instructed to give you, so this is what you fight with.”

I wonder if he was instructed by Lord Darius or by someone else. Officially, interference in the bouts is not just forbidden but considered almost heresy, since the games are considered to be for the glory of the gods. Unofficially, bribery and corruption are rife. It is not unknown for gladiators to be poisoned or deliberately injured in training, to be given substandard equipment or in this case simply to be given weapons that I have not been training with. Anyone who has bet against me might wish to do this to increase their chances of getting a payout.

And the trainer is right: I cannot argue with it. I must fight with what I'm given in the

way I'm told to fight. The trainer leads me to the iron gate leading out to the arena, past the rooms reserved for the healers, with the stone slabs on which they work, and where the bodies of the slain are already lying.

I stand in front of the gates, and now the trainer produces the last piece of my equipment: a helmet with no holes for my eyes. They are determined to make sure I cannot see.

They settle it in place on my head and then lock it into position so that there is no chance that I will be able to remove it during the fight. Instantly the world around me is dark, without so much as a scrap of vision to guide myself. It is no consolation to know that Aya will be having a similar helmet fastened into place on her head right now.

I can hear the calls of the announcer for the games. The emperor does not generally do this part himself.

“Citizens of Aetheria. This is the moment you've been waiting for: the first bout in these games of the mistress of beasts herself: Lyra. But this is to be no ordinary bout. Today we will challenge her to fight in a way she has not fought before, without the benefit of sight!”

The trainers push me forward and I can feel the sun on my skin as I head out from the space beneath the colosseum. I stumble forward, feeling my way with my spear. The roar of the crowd hits me, but it's mixed in with laughter. Some of the crowd are enjoying the fact that I cannot tell what's going on. There are jeers and catcalls from different points around me.

I try to picture the interior of the colosseum, navigating my way forward from memory. I think I know where the emperor's box is in relation to the gate, so I turn and salute him. Judging by some of the cheers and laughter, I don't get the direction

quite right.

The worst part is that I could see everything if I tried. I could reach out with my power and steal the sight of every bird around the colosseum. I know there are always crows and other scavengers waiting both for any food that's thrown away and for the potential to feast on the bodies of the slain. I have used them in my fights before to give myself a better view and I have borrowed their reflexes too, allowing myself to dodge faster than I would otherwise be able to.

But if I do that now, will it be too obvious? If I move as though I can see everything, it will not take the emperor long to realize that I can, and then he will know that I have my powers again. He will realize that I did not have the help of others to kill Lady Emin, that I did not need it. He will know that his own arch magistrate has lied to him and given me back the magic he believed had been taken from me.

So, for now at least, I stand in darkness, holding back from reaching out. I need this to be convincing.

“Her opponent today is new to the colosseum!”

the announcer says.

“Fresh meat!”

someone calls out.

“No challenge!”

another yells. The crowd seems restless. They don't want to see me have easy fights, even if I am one of their favorites now. Perhaps because of it. They want to see the gladiators they like challenged. They might know a brief moment of grief if I fall, but

it will be brief. They care more for the blood and the pain than for me.

“Friends!”

the announcer says. “Do not be so hasty to judge. Because our opponent is a mistress of the earth, able to feel the slightest tremor of movement through it. I give you Aya!”

There is a brief pause, presumably as the crowd gets its first view of my opponent. I know they will be drinking in her size and her strength. I don't know what weapons she'll be carrying, and that's another disadvantage for me because it's important to fight in different ways against different weapons. My guess is that she'll favor something that lets her fight at close range, maybe a sword or an axe, but I don't know for sure.

“In this bout, you, the audience, will see everything, but your gladiators must rely on other senses,”

the announcer says. “Will the mistress of beasts be able to hear her foe coming? Or will Aya sense the spot where Lyra is standing and cut her down?”

There is another pause. In it, the emperor's voice sounds.

“Begin!”

I move, holding my weapons ready, straining my senses to try to pick up any sound around me, but the cheering of the crowd makes that much harder.

I do not need to listen much though because it seems that Aya wants me to come to her.

“This way!”

she calls out. "Come to me and die, Lyra!"

I move towards the sound of her voice, trying to leave it as long as possible before I start to use my powers. I know I will need to at some point, but it is better in these early phases if everything looks as natural as possible, if it truly looks as though I don't know where she is. I must pick my moment carefully.

I move towards the sound of her voice, trying to circle around slightly. I hear the sound of feet moving on the sand, someone coming at me and I swing my net. It deflects part of the blow coming my way but pain still blossoms through my side and I have to throw myself from my feet to avoid any follow up attacks. I can feel the wetness of blood on me as I throw myself to the sand.

I roll, and something thrusts down in the spot where I was just lying. I manage to scramble back to my feet as the crowd roars its approval of first blood going to the new gladiator.

I know I've left it too late, but I still reach out with my powers, grabbing for the sight of every bird I can find around the colosseum, I limp away from Aya as I do it, determined not to be too close until I can see her properly.

Vision flows into me, letting me see what's happening from dozens of different viewpoints, although all of them are above the sands. I do not get to see the combat through my own eyes as well, just through those of the birds.

It means that I get to see Aya for the first time in this fight. She has spiked shoulder plates and belts crossing her torso that are covered in scales of metal, but she is otherwise unarmored. She has a long, curved sword in either hand, giving her twice the capacity to attack. I can see her hunting a smaller figure across the sand, and I must remind myself that it's me.

That reminder is enough to make me throw myself aside as she comes at me again, rolling, trying to ignore the pain in my side. The crowd seems happy with the move, perhaps thinking that I heard her coming.

I had thought that I would have to act the part of not knowing what's going on, but without my own eyes to orient me, this is anything but easy. Yes, I can see the fight now, but I can only see it the way spectators in the topmost rows of the stands would. I do not get the advantage of being able to pick out individual attacks and judge the distance the way I normally would. Instead, I only get a general sense of when Aya is coming at me, giving me just enough time to throw myself aside.

I cannot hear anything over the noise of the crowd. Without my powers, I would be dead by now, and that makes me wonder if I have been thrown into this to die. I manage to raise my spear between myself and an incoming sword blow, but another one scrapes along my chest, opening a fresh line of agony there.

I back away, swinging my net in a circular motion that I hope the crowd will believe is designed just to catch anything that comes my way. I adjust the movement slightly as a sword blow comes at me, and feel the weapon wrap around Aya's sword, tangling it.

But she uses it to pull me in, her strength far greater than my own. I see her raising her other sword through the eyes of the birds, and I manage to duck inside the swing, slamming into her.

"We both know you can't wrestle,"

she snarls, even as she slams her helmet into mine in a vicious headbutt that makes my ears ring. Through the eyes of the birds, I see her drop her tangled sword, and I feel the impact as she swings a punch into my ribs.

I try to pull back from her, but she's holding me tight, so I must copy her idea and drop my spear. It is too long to use at such close quarters. I go to draw my knife, and her hand closes over my wrist. I can see her pulling back her other arm, still holding a sword, ready to finish me.

I drop, falling to the ground and swinging my net around her ankles. Even though her sword is still tangled in it, that does not stop the movement. If anything, the additional weight means that I can wrap her legs up more easily. I yank them from under her, and she tumbles to the ground.

I crawl searching for my spear and even with the eyes of the birds I must grope for it. I see Aya working to disentangle her legs. She is getting up now, her sword rising, obviously knowing exactly where I am.

I lift my spear and thrust. I feel the impact as it plunges deep into her torso, impaling her as she throws herself forward at me. Her sword skitters from my vambraces, opening another wound on my arm, but it is the last strike she has the strength to throw. Her sword falls from her fingers, and she collapses to the sand.

“Kill, kill, kill!”

the crowd chants.

“Finish her,”

the emperor commands.

In another fight, at another time, I would refuse to do it, but I can still see Alaric through the eyes of the birds. I can see him, and I know what is at stake here.

“Finish her or he pays the price!”

The crowd probably doesn't know what's going on, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that the emperor is proving he has power over me. He's proving that he can make me do whatever he wants. I go to Aya, pulling my spear from her chest as she lies there, hands still groping for her sword.

"I'm sorry,"

I murmur, and I slam the point of the spear down again, through her heart.

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I return to the space beneath the colosseum, my heart aching with the fact that I have been forced to kill at the emperor's whim. I head to the healers, sitting on a stone slab while they work on me, healing the injuries Aya inflicted on me while I strove not to show the powers I now have access to again.

I know she would have killed me if she had the chance, but that doesn't make it better. This isn't about what she would have done; it's about the ways the system of the colosseum has changed me in the time I have been here. In my first season, I refused to kill even when the emperor commanded it. Somewhere along the line, I have become more willing to do what is required. I have hardened and become a more dangerous gladiator, but I suspect I have also lost something in the process.

I look around, seeing that Rowan is also receiving treatment.

“How bad are your wounds?”

I ask him, hoping that he is not too badly injured. A bad wound in one round of the games can mean being forced to miss the rest of them and thus the season not counting towards freedom. Or worse, we can be made to fight anyway, and the wound can slow us down enough that we are vulnerable to our opponents.

“I'm fine,”

Rowan says. He doesn't add more than that, but rather he stands, heading for the door.

“Are you going to the noble reception rooms?” I ask.

I see him wince. I've said the wrong thing because I'm sure that Lady Tyra is waiting for him there.

“Let me go with you,”

I say, but Rowan is already walking out of there. It's obvious he doesn't want to talk to me. Clearly, he doesn't want to risk being caught up in the revolt I am wrapped up in. Maybe he's still angry with me for even suggesting it to him. Rowan has made his feelings clear when it comes to revolts.

I want to follow but I need to let the healers finish their work. That means sitting there on the stone slab for long minutes while I'm forced to imagine what might be happening between Rowan and his former owner. I'm impatient to get out of here now, and not just because I don't want to sit in a room that contains the bodies of the dead.

Aya's body is here, staring over at me with blank eyes in a way that I imagine is somehow an accusation. I want to get away from her even as I know that I must fulfill my duty and attend the nobles in their receiving room.

I head up through the colosseum, to a bright, light room hung with silken tapestries and with a mosaic floor. There are couches here on which nobles lounge, while servants stand nearby with golden platters of food and jugs of wine. There are rooms nearby where the nobles can take us for more privacy.

Being in this place brings back bad memories. It is a place where the nobles go to be seen with gladiators, to get a frisson of danger by spending time around them. Many feel that it brings them honor to spend time around successful fighters, and it allows them to build connections with the gladiators for the moment when those warriors pass through their five seasons in the games and are free. It is also a place where the nobles often seek to seduce the gladiators, where they seek to lay claim to all the

young, muscular bodies they have seen fighting on the arena floor.

I can see plenty of gladiators here already, talking in groups with nobles, sitting on couches with them. I see Cesca seated between a noble couple. Even as I watch, she rises, taking both of their hands and leading them towards a side room.

Nobles start to approach me, but I keep my distance. The iron collar around my neck proclaims me a slave gladiator, but that doesn't mean they can all do as they wish. Many of them look at me with something like awe, which is surprising when they're all nobles and I am common born.

“Have you considered what you'll do once you complete this season?”

a nobleman in his twenties asks.

“Oh, leave her alone Cirrus. I'm sure she has no interest in being your lover while you write poetry about her.”

“A man can ask, can't he? It's obvious she'll end up as some great noble's wife.”

Is it obvious to them? Is that what they think will happen to me once I complete my time in the games? I will be free. I will be technically noble. I have been told that positions open up for former gladiators within the society of Aetheria. I assumed that meant positions as an official or as something in the military. Do they really think that the only future I have to look forward to is being the wife of a nobleman?

Not that I have any such future to look forward to now. Not now that I have agreed to the emperor's offer. A life outside the games without Alaric would mean nothing, and so I will continue to compete. Continue to excite the crowds in the hope that one day, the emperor will show mercy to both of us.

I look around for any sign of Alaric. Since the emperor is keeping him in a noble box at the games for me to see, maybe there is a chance he will be able to come here to the receiving rooms. Maybe I will get to speak with him to see him.

But there is no sign of him here. It seems the emperor is keeping us apart, at least for now.

One of the servants comes to me, looking almost deferential as she approaches, bowing her head as if I am a noble and not a fellow captive of the empire.

“Lyra? Your new patron ordered me to watch for you and to bring you to a private room as soon as you came into the receiving area.”

Fear fills me again at the prospect of another patron I do not know.

“Who is this patron?” I ask.

The servant shakes her head, looking slightly frightened. “Forgive me, but I have been commanded not to say anything. It is not something they wish everyone to know just yet.”

At first I think her fear is of this new patron but I realize that she's at least partly afraid of how I will react. Does she really think I'm the cruel, deadly beast whisperer they paint me as? That I will react with violence because she has not answered me? But then, why wouldn't she? If she has seen anything of these games, she will have seen me drive a spear into Aya's heart.

But I fear at least as much fear as she does. Because I do not know what my new patron will want from me, what I will be forced to do next.

“Will you come?”

she asks. "Please?"

"Yes, of course,"

I reply, even though I feel anything but happy about it. My mind is racing as I say it because I'm trying to work out who this mysterious new patron is. I didn't know I had a new patron yet. Has the emperor arranged this one the way he did with the last? If so he will have picked someone who will make my life harder. He has never shown me kindness.

The servant leads me to one of the side rooms and my heart is beating faster with every moment as I close in on the private room. I fear what will happen to me next, what this patron will want from me.

My new patron is in there, sitting on a couch in noble robes, reclining in splendor there. The young man there is blonde haired and blue eyed, with a look of arrogance that almost matches Alaric's, but which lacks his humor. A thin web of silvery scars crosses his face.

"Vex?"

My new patron is Vex, the former gladiator who completed his five seasons in the last set of games. Vex, who has been my enemy for much of my time in Ironhold. Whose scars are the work of a shadow cat I summoned.

"That will be all,"

he says in a commanding tone to the servant.

I can only stand there and stare at him. "You? You're my patron?"

“The emperor prevented others from bidding on you,”

Vex says. “He wanted me to be here. I imagine he believes that this will hurt you.”

Giving me into the hands of my enemies does more than hurt me. As my patron, Vex can command my presence. Can command more than that given that I'm a slave gladiator. The last time I got a new patron, they beat me to within an inch of my life. My whole body thrums with tension, wondering what Vex has planned.

“Whatever you're planning, get it over with,”

I say. I won't give Vex the satisfaction of seeing me frightened. And whatever he tries, I will fight him.

“It is natural you would react like this,”

Vex says. “Everyone knows there is bad blood between us. It's why the emperor allowed me to be your patron when Lady Elara was willing to bid so much. Where he has gone wrong is assuming that I am his friend.”

Those words catch me by surprise, making me stare at Vex in shock.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I mean that he's made a mockery of these games,”

Vex says. “I have completed my time in them. I have my place in noble society back, but now I must watch as he continues to take something that should be holy and use it merely as a tool of politics and entertainment.”

I had forgotten how strongly Vex feels about the games. He yearns for the days of the

past where they existed as something that the noble citizens of Aetheria entered freely, seeking to prove themselves before the gods in what was seen as a sacred rite of combat.

“Why tell me that?”

I ask. “You know we're not friends.”

“I hated what you represent,”

Vex says. “A system filled with slave gladiators, where the poorest wretches from the fringes of the empire are brought to fight. Where even a beast whisperer is given a place.”

Venom drips from those two words. “But I also know you are part of something that seeks to bring it all down.”

“I... don't know what you're talking about,”

I say. There is no way I'm admitting my part in the spectral covenant to Vex. He says that he is dissatisfied with the games the way they're run, but isn't it just as likely that he has agreed to serve the emperor by finding out what I know?

“You don't trust me,”

Vex says. “That is understandable, but consider your position, Lyra.”

“Is this where you tell me how bad you make things for me if I don't cooperate with you?”

I ask. If Vex tries to hurt me, I will fight him with all the powers at my disposal. It

doesn't matter that doing so will expose that I still have access to those powers. Not with Vex.

“I believe bad things are already happening to you,”

Vex says. “You are being forced to keep fighting in the games past your five seasons, correct?”

He knows about the emperor’s deal? I nod.

“And Alaric is being kept alive to ensure your compliance,”

Vex continues. “Neither of these things is acceptable. The games should not be tampered with in such a way, and Alaric... for all that he is a fool who has let himself fall in love with the likes of you, he is still one of the finest nobles of the empire. It is not right for the emperor to treat him in such a way. A... certain group of fellow nobles agrees with me.”

I agree with him but I don't want to do it out loud. This might still all be a way of entrapping me, getting me to condemn myself and the others around me.

“I am just a gladiator,”

I say. “I fight now when I am commanded to fight.”

Vex smiles tightly. “You still don't trust me. As I say, that is understandable, but I hope you will change your mind soon. The very fate of the empire, and of these games, depends upon it.”

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I stumble back to Ironhold at the conclusion of the games for the day, marching with the other gladiators who have survived in procession while my mind reels with the things Vex said to me. Was he serious about representing a group of nobles who want to change the current system of the empire? Who wants to overthrow the emperor, perhaps?

He has not said as much, but the implication was clear. I don't know what to make of it, whether he's serious or whether it's a trap. I feel as though I'm bobbing on a small boat, seeing a storm approaching and not knowing which way to turn to avoid being swept away by it.

Carts carry the injured and the dead back to the fortress. I wonder about that briefly, about how much of the dead is brought back, to be buried unceremoniously in the depths of Ironhold. Again and again I have been told that the magic of the dead flows into the stones beneath Aetheria, feeding them and ensuring that they continue to pump out power. Those who fall are as much sacrifices as simply victims of the cruelty of the arena.

It's a troubling thought, but then, everything about my situation is troubling. I am caught up in the games, but now I don't even have the opportunity for freedom that everyone else has. I will keep fighting, keep taking part in the games, until the emperor tires of me. I doubt he will simply let me go then either. Probably he will have me killed. But if this is my only way of keeping Alaric from being killed for saving me, what choice do I have?

Lord Darius is waiting when we get back, for a ceremony that he repeats every night of the games.

“You have come through the first day of the games, but many have not. It is our custom to honor those who have died. The fallen!”

He slams his fist to his chest and raises it in salute.

“The fallen!”

we repeat, copying the gesture. There is a moment of silence that follows, each of us remembering those who have died. I find myself remembering Aya in the moment when I killed her. The pain of having to do that is still fresh. I grieve for her, even as I take responsibility for having done it.

The next part is every bit as familiar. Those of us who can go to the practice posts and training rooms, going through our fights either alone or with others. Normally, I would go through the day with either Rowan or Alaric. Alaric is not here, and Rowan keeps away from me, as if afraid I will drag him into a conspiracy he does not want to be a part of.

It means I must train alone, going through my fight step by step, trying to work out what I could have done differently to avoid the wounds I suffered. Clearly, I should have taken the sight of the birds earlier, but how much earlier? The fact that I could not see on my way out made my performance more convincing to the emperor and others. It hid the fact that I still had my powers more completely than if I had used the sight of the birds to guide me in those early phases.

There is a broader question there: how am I going to use my powers through the rest of these games without it being obvious? If it is a matter of life and death, then I will have to use every scrap of power at my disposal, but if I can do it any other way, I must disguise my actions. I must make people believe that I am fighting without access to my powers, surviving purely because of my physical skills.

There is a way to do that, but it is not one I like. Lady Elara has taught me the skills of the beast whisperers, and some of those skills are dark and dangerous, dominating animals rather than soothing them, taking attributes from them, setting them against one another. It is possible to borrow the strength or sight of an animal, its claws or its teeth. It is a skill that I have been cautious about beyond borrowing the sight of a few birds, and with good reason. If I take too much, I might kill the animals I borrow from. If I am too cautious, too slow about the way I give that strength back, I might find myself transformed, losing track of my own shape.

It is a precarious balancing act and one I hope I can avoid. I have gotten through fights just with the additional sight the birds have given me, and a few reflexes borrowed from them. I hope I will not need more than that, even as I fear that I will.

I keep working for a while, then head to the bathhouse to clean the grime from me. The water turns briefly red with blood, some of it my own, some of it that of Aya. The stains of the sand fade away from me, and finally I'm able to head back to the dining hall.

There is music here and some degree of celebration. There are always those who like to drink and dance on the nights of the games. To slip into one another's rooms and seek solace in any arms they can. For the most part, the more serious gladiators hold back until the games are done. It is better not to overindulge when we will have to fight again tomorrow.

I take one small cup of wine and some stew, eating alone in a corner. It seems that everyone is either afraid of me or dislikes me. Even Rowan doesn't want to be around me at the moment. I sit there and I watch the others, but there is only so long I can watch other people celebrating as if it might be their last night of life. Especially when some of them will undoubtedly be proved right in the morning.

I slip away from the celebrations, not heading for my room for now, but instead

moving up through the fortress, towards the space that serves as both the gallery and a temple, filled with statues of the gladiators who have gone before, each marked with their names and their deeds. It is the place where I first met Vex, and his actions today make me wonder what I should do next. I suspect I will have to wait to see what his intentions truly are. If he is trying to entrap me, then his patience will not last long.

When that patience runs out, what then? Will he have me dragged into a torture chamber? Will he simply have me killed?

I'm not sure exactly why I have come to the gallery space. Perhaps it has something to do with the statue of Valerian, most famous of all the beast whisperers who has passed through the colosseum in the past. Her image shows her sitting atop a pile of slain creatures as if they are a throne for her. The statue stares out with what seems like unforgiving cruelty at the world. I wonder if she was really like that, or if the sculptor merely decided that was the story he wanted to tell about her. Did she ever have doubts about the use of her powers? The stories I've heard suggest that she didn't, that she was happy to be a thing out of nightmares.

Is that what Lady Elara will show to the city in her coup? Will she unleash that side of the beast whisperers on them?

It occurs to me that, if I were to ask the people of the city about beast whisperers, it would not be Valerian's name that they say. I would be the one they speak about. My fame has grown, and I'm not sure how I feel about that. There is something powerful about hearing a crowd chant my name, but I also hate that they only know an image of me crafted by the emperor and others. Even Lady Elara has sought to craft that image to her own ends, from the rumors that we are lovers, designed to hide our real aims, to her insistence that I must be loved by the crowd in readiness for her and the spectral covenant to make their move.

I sit by the statue of Valerian, tucked away in the corner of the room behind several other statues, contemplating her past and my future. I'm still there when I hear voices coming from another part of the room. People come in, and I wonder if I should make myself known. If this is some couple who is looking for a quiet place to be together I don't want to be in here.

“Are you sure no one more will overhear us here?”

a man asks.

“This is as good a place as any,”

a woman replies. “Have you managed to persuade many of the others?”

I shift my position, wondering if I can sneak out without being seen.

“Some,”

the man says. “But to incite open rebellion is-”

“Wait,”

the woman says. “There's someone here. Who's there? Show yourself! Come out now.”

I step out from the shadows of the statues, wondering what will happen next. After all, I've just heard them talk about rebellion. Can they let me go after that?

The woman is vaguely familiar. She was a rebel before she was put here. Her name is Bella, and she was forced to fight one of her fellow rebels out on the sands. The winner got to live but only as a slave within Ironhold.

She looks at me with suspicion for a moment, but then seems to recognize me.

“I know you,”

she says. “Lyra Thornwind. The beast whisperer.”

“Not much of one,”

I reply, lifting my left wrist to show the dampener there. I need to maintain the lie.

“I’d forgotten that part,”

Bella says. “Although I haven't forgotten that it wasn’t so long ago that the emperor was your patron.”

“To try to control me,”

I say. “And he put me aside quickly enough.”

“I heard that you killed your last patron,”

the man says.

I don’t reply to that. It's the kind of thing I can't admit without condemning myself.

“Edron, don't be stupid. Of course, she's not going to admit to that,”

Bella says. She looks me up and down. “But it occurs to me that you might be the kind of person who wants to join our cause.”

“What cause?” I ask.

“We've heard the rumors of rebellion around Aetheria. I was a part of it all. It's the reason I was caught, the reason I was put in here. I didn't think I'd have a chance to do more. I thought I would just die here. Now though, maybe there will be a chance to rise up, to overthrow the people who keep us in chains.”

It's a dangerous thing for her to say. If I were to go to the guards with it, Bella would be punished, possibly even executed. If I don't and someone learns that we are having this conversation, the same might happen to me.

“So you want me to join your... what? Escape attempt?” I say.

“Not just that,”

Bella insists. “The gladiators here are some of the best trained fighters in the city. If we rise up, and the gangs join us, we can rip the throne away from the emperor, kill the nobles and run the city for the benefit of those who matter.”

“And you want me to be a part of this?”

I say, trying to hide some of my surprise. Lady Elara asked me to stir up the gladiators towards rebellion, but it seems that there is a group of them who are already on the brink of it. It doesn't sound as though they would have much time for Lady Elara, though.

“People will listen to you,”

Bella says. “And yes, you might not have much power now, but when we cut that thing from your wrist... then you will be able to do a lot for the cause.”

“I... I'll need to think about it,”

I say. I can't give her a commitment, because I know that the moment I rise up against the empire, the emperor will have Alaric killed.

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The next morning, details of my next match are up on the board. It is to be a pair's match, in which I am due to fight alongside Cesca, against a pair of opponents whose names I do not recognize.

I collect my armor and take my place in the procession down to the city. I find Cesca along the way, walking close to her, hoping that we can coordinate our tactics. She looks over at me as I approach, and there is something calculating about her stare.

"Are you looking forward to our match?" she asks.

"I never look forward to any of it,"

I say. "But we need to work out how we're going to fight together. I don't know much about these opponents."

Cesca shrugs. "They're both glimmers. Barca is a brute who has just enough power to make his muscles swell to something monstrous. Zax is fast, and he can make small puffs of air to send sand up at people."

It's obvious she's done her research on this. Neither of our opponents' talents sound overwhelming but each has the potential to give them an edge if we aren't careful. We will need to work together well in order to win.

"So how do you want to do this?" I ask.

"With those long weapons of yours, it makes sense if you herd them, and then I move in to finish them. I can shock people pretty well with my talent."

She holds up her hands, sparks of lightning flying between her fingertips. In the colosseum she uses a long, slender sword which can conduct the lightning along its length. It means that even a touch from it will let her stun her foes.

Stunning them sounds good to me because it means I might not have to kill them. Not unless the emperor commands it. But to avoid that, we will have to give him and the crowd a good show.

“We should draw the fight out a little,”

I say. “Hit and move. Give the crowd something to cheer for.”

Cesca smiles at that. “Oh, they’ll cheer.”

Around us a crowd is already cheering, watching the procession as we head to the colosseum. I walk through the marching gladiators, drifting away from Cesca for now, determined to see what I can of our opponents before the moment comes to fight them.

I'm surprised when Rowan falls into step by my side. He hasn't been talking to me, so why would he want to be so close?

“You can’t trust Cesca,”

he says to me, keeping his voice low.

“What?” I reply.

“You can't trust her, not today. I overheard her and the nobles she was with yesterday.”

I think back to the memory of Cesca sitting with the noble couple, then getting up to go to one of the private rooms with them. I had assumed that she was simply giving herself to them to forge connections.

“They want her to betray you during the bout. They think they can make a fortune on the betting, and she's agreed. Of course, she has when they've offered to be her patrons.”

I wince at the truth of that. Cesca has spent her time in Ironhold, latching onto one strong figure after another, trying to find someone who will keep her safe. Perhaps she has decided that suitable patrons will make her time easier, or that they will give her a better life once she is done here.

Anger and fear mix in me now. Anger at what she has planned. Fear, because I'm not sure if there's anything I can do to survive it. A part of me wants to walk up to her and smash her to the ground, but I know I can't.

“How did you learn all of this?” I ask.

Rowan shrugs. “They were eager to get Lady Tyra on their side. Nobles seek alliances as quickly as any gladiator.”

And he was by Lady Tyra's side, because she is controlling him now, as surely as the emperor is controlling me.

“Thank you,” I say.

Rowan nods, but then moves away from me. It's clear there's a difference between not wanting to see me killed and having forgiven me for suggesting rebellion to him.

We make our way down to the colosseum and wait in the spaces beneath it for our

matches. I have my weapons now, my spear and net, along with my short dagger. I can feel the tension rising in me as I hear the sounds of battles from outside, the clash of steel and the cries of pain. It is not just the usual nerves before a fight.

My bout was balanced, something I stood a good chance in, perhaps something where I wouldn't have had to show any of my powers, because I could leave much of the work to Cesca. Now, though, I will be facing not just my two opponents but her as well.

When will she attack me? Will she leave it until our foes are down? That makes the most sense, since it will mean she doesn't have to fight two gladiators alone, but I will have to watch my back the whole time. And I will have to find a way to survive. I'm not sure I can do that against three opponents.

“It's time,”

a trainer says, coming to collect me and taking me to the iron gate. Cesca is waiting there, dressed in a few scraps of armor designed to show off her figure as much as to protect her. She holds a slender sword, balanced as lightly as if it is a baton.

Should I confront her with what I know? I can't. If I do then my only advantage is gone. She will know that I know and adjust her plans accordingly. I can't even go to the trainers with the news. This kind of interference is common enough that it is not punished harshly.

“I give you your gladiators, Lyra and Cesca!”

the announcer says.

We step out onto the sands and I reach for the eyes of the birds, looking down on the fight as well as through my eyes. I use those eyes to scour the stands for Alaric,

wanting to see him, wanting to know he is safe.

I see him there in his fine box, surrounded by guards and servants. He is looking out at me with obvious worry.

I return my focus to myself and Cesca. We step out together, listening to the cheers of the crowd. It is not long before our opponents step through the gate at the opposite side of the arena.

“I give you Barca and Zax!”

the announcer says.

Barca goes bare-chested, and even as I watch, the muscles of his chest and arms seem to swell. It seems that Cesca was right about his magic. He wields a great hammer, which he slams down into the dirt as if to demonstrate his strength, sending up a shower of sand.

Zax is slender, dressed in mobile plates of armor. He follows in Barca’s wake, using a sword and shield. Even as the sand comes up into the air, Zax sends it my way. In this, it seems that Cesca has underestimated him because it's like standing in a sandstorm. The battle is joined without warning, and I must move to react in time as our two opponents charge at us.

I wheel away from that charge, raising my spear and my net, ready to advance on them. Even as I do it, the eyes of the birds show me the figure moving in behind me, sword already raised for a killing blow.

If I weren't expecting the attack, I suspect that Cesca would be able to land it on me before I could react. As it is, I whirl with my net, wrapping it around her quickly, whipping her feet out from under her. She goes down with a cry, which is only made

louder as I use the bottom of my spear to knock her sword from her hand. She tries to struggle free from my net but I wrap the trailing rope of it around her, pinning her arms to her sides and then tying the end of it said that she will not be able to escape the tangling net.

Some of the crowd cheer at that development, while some make sounds of shock. Cesca glares at me, struggling against her bonds, but I'm already moving away from her. I can see Alaric looking down with worry.

I have taken Cesca out of the fight, at least for now, but I don't know how long it will be before she breaks free. In the meantime, I am fighting two gladiators with just a spear. I dodge the next attack, borrowing a hint of speed and agility from the birds to be able to lean back far enough to let a hammer blow pass above me. I cartwheel out of the way of a thrust from Zax, then move back, knowing that I can't allow the two of them to flank me.

We exchange attacks. I thrust with my spear and they attack into every opening I give them. Even when they are vulnerable I cannot press the attack against one of them, because to do so would be to leave me open to the other. They are ignoring Cesca. Perhaps they have decided that she is out of the fight. Perhaps they think they can just finish her at their leisure.

It means that their full focus is on me, and fear starts to fill me as the bout goes on. I can feel my strength starting to wane. I'm having to do so much just to survive these two opponents that I know I will not be able to keep it up forever. Already, sweat is dripping from me, meaning that the sand Zax sends at me sticks to my skin. I am starting to breathe heavily, and the two of them seem to take that as their cue to intensify their attacks.

I need more if I'm going to fight them and win. More strength, more stamina, more power. And I know where to get it. It is simply that doing so is dangerous, risks

changing me forever.

I reach out with my talent, feeling the creatures of the beast pits below the colosseum. I reach for them, and I take what I need. I take strength from a great ape, there to crush criminals. I take stamina from a mighty iron hide, the rhinoceros-like creature I have fought before. I borrow agility from the birds and speed from a snake. I take a little from each place, hoping that if I spread it out enough, I will not destroy the creatures I am borrowing from.

I sway aside from Zax's attack, lashing out with my spear to sweep Barca's legs out from under him. The big man goes down with a thud, roaring as he comes up. He charges at me and I sidestep, parrying another of Zax's attacks as I go.

"Lyra! Lyra! Lyra!"

The crowd is chanting my name now, and I spin my spear, turning its movements into a web of attacks and defenses. Barca grabs for me, but I duck at the last moment, thrusting up with my spear so that my movement drives the weapon through him. I abandon my grip on it, throwing myself forward into a roll even as I draw my short, curved dagger.

Zax swings at me, but I'm under the level of his attack thanks to my roll. I slash at his hamstrings as I go past him, feeling the impact as my blade tears through his flesh. He cries out in agony and falls. I come to my feet and the crowd are roaring my name now.

My heart is still beating far too fast. I look up to the emperor's box. It is obvious that the fight is over in all but name, but will he demand that I kill these foes as he did with Aya?

There is a brief pause, presumably as the emperor makes up his mind. What would I

do if he demands that I kill all three of my foes? I hate it, but I already know the answer. I will do what he wants. I have no choice.

A gong sounds though, signaling the end of the bout. The announcer steps forward.

“The gladiator Lyra and her teammate Cesca are the victors of this bout!”

The idea that we're a team is a fiction, one that the crowd can see right through, but my victory is real enough. Barca is lying on the ground in agony with a spear still protruding from his guts. Zax is crawling, blood pouring from the back of his legs. I don't know if even the healers here can give him back the ability to walk. And Cesca lies where I left her, still bound.

I leave her there as I walk from the sands, slowly returning the attributes that I borrowed from the animals beneath the colosseum. It is a pointed move, showing the crowd what I think of her betrayal. I hope that my victory has been a powerful message to anyone else who wants to betray me, but even as I walk from the sands with the cheers of the crowd ringing in my ears, I can't help feeling a note of pain.

It isn't just that Cesca has betrayed me. No, this pain comes from the realization that if I hadn't taken the emperor's offer, I would be just one fight away from freedom. Just one fight from being able to call myself a noble of Aetheria, and being able to leave, to go back to my home.

I could have all that if I were willing to abandon Alaric to his fate. If I were simply willing to walk away I would be able to take my freedom and step away from all of the plots and the intrigues of the colosseum. I could ignore the various groups vying to overthrow the emperor, and simply let the city of Aetheria devour itself in the coming violence.

But I cannot simply bring myself to abandon Alaric. I cannot allow the emperor to

execute him. And that means I'm stuck in the middle of all of it. A wave of violence is coming, and I do not know which way to go when the time comes.

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After my victory, I only need a little time among the healers. I have suffered no major wounds this time, nothing that requires their talents to help me. I do, however, need a minute or two sitting alone to make sure that I have let the last of the abilities I have borrowed from the beasts flow out of me. I can feel my heartbeat slowing a little and I don't know if it is because the adrenaline rush of the fight is fading, or because some aggressive animal essence is leaving me.

But I don't get to sit there for long.

“Move,”

one of the trainers snaps at me. “You're wanted up above in the receiving rooms.”

I force myself to head up to the space reserved for meeting with the nobles. I can feel the eyes on me as I enter that space, and I wonder what I must look like to them. It is normal that we come into the receiving rooms without cleaning up after our fights. The nobles like to see a little blood, like to convince themselves that, because they can touch the dried blood on someone's arm, it is almost the same as being in the colosseum themselves.

But I have sand covering much of my skin, thanks to Zax's efforts. It's not just that though. They look at me with a kind of new level of awe, because they have just seen me take down three people at once, without being wounded in return.

One of those people enters the receiving room. Cesca hurries in, looking as though she doesn't want to be there. She looks embarrassed by what has happened to her, what I did to her.

“You-”

she begins moving towards me.

“You were going to stab me in the back,”

I say, looking at her levelly. “I stopped you without killing you. Do you object to me doing that, Cesca? Should I have killed you instead, the way you were going to kill me?”

She looks even more embarrassed as she is forced to shake her head. She hurries past me, heading for the couple she was with before, but they turn away from her. She's learning that the nobles here are interested in us for exactly as long as we are useful to them.

A servant is waiting to show me through to the same side room I met Vex in before. He is standing there with a cloak thrown over his arm. He tosses it to me as soon as I get in there.

“Put this on,” he says.

“What for?” I ask.

“For one thing, it will do something to disguise the sand on you. For another I would rather you weren't recognized on the short trip we're about to take.”

I'm instantly suspicious. Why would Vex want to take me anywhere? As my patron, I know he can take me out of the games when I am not fighting, as long as he has me back at Ironhold by evening. But where would he want to take me?

There are some potentially disturbing possibilities. Maybe Vex has decided that

trying to get me to talk about the spectral covenant isn't going to work, so he's going to take me somewhere quiet where he can question me more forcefully. Maybe he has decided to make me disappear. In theory, he could put me on a slaver's cart heading away from the city, and it would merely look as though I'd run off.

Those possibilities don't seem likely, but it's hard to trust that Vex is doing this for any reason that isn't designed to harm me.

“Put on the cloak,”

Vex insists.

I do it. It's not as though I can refuse the instruction. Vex is still my patron, which means he has a measure of control over me, and I will be punished if I do not obey. The way Vex is doing this only makes me more suspicious, though.

I shroud myself in the cloak, then follow him as he leads me from the colosseum. He has the hood of his own cloak up as we make our way through the crowd. He leads the way through the city on foot, when I might have expected a fine noble to have a palanquin or a chariot. There are many people inside the arena, but there are almost as many gathered around it, in a kind of grand market for the holy day.

The first place Vex leads me is a gruesome one. He takes me to a spot where half a dozen people have been tied to posts and disemboweled, left there with signs around their necks proclaiming them to be traitors. I am used to death, to the violence of the arena, but this still makes me want to retch.

“Why bring me here?”

I ask him.

“Do you know what these people did?” Vex asks.

“The signs say that they're traitors,” I say.

“But do you know what they did to be called traitors?” Vex asks.

I shake my head.

“They dared to suggest that some imperial officials were hoarding grain for themselves,”

Vex says. He gestures for me to keep moving as he leads the way further through the city.

I see a child huddled by the side of the road, looking slender and sick. Even as I watch, a woman who must be her mother shuffles her out of sight.

We are not on the main streets now, not on the ones that are decorated for the processions of the holy days. I can see the spots where houses have been looted.

“There are gangs in the city,”

Vex says. “The emperor does nothing to contain them unless they hurt the wrong noble.”

I don't mention that Bella and her friends think the gangs are on their side. Vex continues to lead the way through the city. He heads down to the docks with me, and I can see the lines of people there. Vex leads me to them. I can see the desperation in their eyes.

“Are they leaving the city?” I ask.

Vex laughs briefly and bitterly. “Hardly. These are the ones who need to beg for food. The ones who can't afford the inflated prices in the markets. They wait for every shipment, and descend on it.”

As he says it a woman reaches out to me. She has a child by her side who looks half-starved. “Please. Spare any coin you can.”

The movement dislodges my hood, revealing my face in the sunlight. Around me, people blink and turn to stare at me.

“You’re Lyra,”

the woman says. “Lyra, the mistress of beasts.”

I wince at the name.

“You're mistaken,”

Vex says, but that doesn't make things any better.

“No, it's her,”

a man says. “I saw her fight in the Champions Trials. Lyra! It’s Lyra, everyone!”

People are starting to look my way.

“Help us!”

a woman calls out. “They're holding back the food. They had it, but they just want to make a fortune on it once the prices go up.”

“Help us!”

a man calls. “Anyone who speaks out about it is executed.”

“The officials do what they want,”

a woman says.

They start to crowd around me, each telling me the things that the city and its officials have done to them as if I might be able to help them somehow. As if I am able to change their lives. I have been shown to them as a hero and so it seems obvious to them that I should be able to do something.

“Damn it,”

Vex mutters. He pulls the hood back over my head. “We're getting out of here; keep moving.”

He starts to push his way through the crowd, one hand clamped on my arm so that he will not lose me. People crowd around but they give way the moment Vex's daggers take to the air, forming a ring of deadly steel around us, propelled by the telekinetic talents that saw him succeed in the colosseum.

“You don't need to do that, Vex,”

I say, as he pulls me through the crowd.

“Of course I do. Do you think I'm going to trust that the poor will hold back on their own account?”

We make it clear, and Vex brings his daggers back to him.

“Why show me all that?”

I demand, as we continue to walk.

“So you can see what's at stake in the city. The emperor has suborned the games to entertain the masses. He wishes to distract them from their troubles. And when that doesn't work, he has them killed.”

He's moving quickly, so I almost have to run to keep pace.

“And you're trying to tell me that you care about the masses?”

I ask. I know Vex better than that.

“I care about the games. I care about the fact the emperor is ruining the city. And I know you will care about this. The time has come for a different emperor.”

“Emperor Vex?” I guess.

“Someone from my faction at least,”

Vex says. “We would change things in the city. We would make sure it was run in a more orderly way. Officials would not flout the rules. The games would be run according to the old ways. And if you were a part of it, things would be better.”

Perhaps he's even right. That's the scariest thing, that there's a chance I find myself agreeing with Vex.

“Think on it more,”

Vex says. “I will return you to the colosseum now, but consider your position. The

emperor offers nothing but endless violence as he tries to hold onto his city. And my guess is that any other faction trying to take it from him will unleash war on the street. Wouldn't it be better to wrest it from his grasp cleanly? To hand it to someone who will restore Aetheria to glory?"

I want to tell him that his dreams of power are simple megalomania, but I can't. Not now that I've seen the faces of the hungry, seen the bodies of the executed. I thought that Vex was trying to trap me, but it's clear now that he's as serious about rebellion as the other groups.

The question is not now whether I get involved, but how and on whose side.

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Vex takes me back to the receiving room, the two of us slipping in quietly. We go to the private room and he takes back his cloak before he goes.

“Think about what I've said,”

Vex says, standing and leaving. “And about what you've seen.”

I know I will be able to do little else. Already I'm trying to work out what I should do. I can't stand back when it's obvious that so many are suffering, but I also can't commit to helping any rebellion when Alaric's life hangs in the balance. The moment I act against the emperor, Alaric will be killed.

It is an impossible situation, and one that is not helped as I step out of the private room and I see Lady Elara there, sitting on a couch with Cesca beside her. It seems that Cesca is trying to get herself a new patron, after her failure with the previous two nobles. For a moment or two, Lady Elara seems interested as Cesca talks to her and shares wine, but then she looks over to me and stands abruptly.

Cesca looks hurt by that, and angry as she looks over at me. How is she the angry one when she's the one who betrayed me? Is this really going to be another rivalry within the colosseum? Another gladiator who will seek to target me wherever she can? Part of me wonders if I should have struck her down with my spear rather than tangling her in my net. The rest of me is shocked at the thought. Have I really reached the point where I will consider killing someone because it is more expedient than letting them live?

That is what this place does to us. It has made me into someone who will kill when

the emperor commands it. Someone who enjoys the fame. Someone the version of me who was brought here from my village would probably barely recognize.

Lady Elara comes over to me. “Lyra, it is good to see you. Your partner in the last bout was keeping me company. She was just telling me that she would be all too eager to live up to all the rumors she's heard about you and me.”

She says it just loud enough for others to hear, and I see further embarrassment cross Cesca's face. Lady Elara holds out her hand to me, leading me in the direction of one of the private rooms. I go with her even though she is not my patron. It's a moment that appears scandalous, as if she has just ignored Cesca pointedly for the chance to sleep with me. We head through into a room lined with silks and with a couch in the center, leaving Cesca to her embarrassment.

“You did well to survive her betrayal,”

Elara says, as she settles onto the couch. “Although people who didn't see her attempt to kill you clearly think that you betrayed her to get more glory by fighting two on one.”

The idea that people would think that of me horrifies me. I am not a traitor to my friends, do not betray people if they are not about to betray me or those around me first.

“You aren't really interested in her, are you?” I say.

She shrugs. “I get the feeling that she is interested in anyone who will help her. I don't blame her, as you should not. She is at most an illustration of some of the things wrong here. Things we should be changing. The uprising is coming, Lyra.”

“Vex was saying something similar,”

I say. I want to know where things stand with Lady Elara and the spectral covenant. What their plans are, and how soon they intend to implement them. Vex means to act, and so, possibly, does Bella.

“Him,”

Lady Elara says, and her tone makes it clear that she doesn't like Vex. If I had any thoughts that they might be connected, those thoughts are easy to dismiss now. “He is not someone you should be spending time around.”

“He's my new patron,”

I say. “I don't exactly get a choice.”

If I had been given that choice, then I would never have met with Vex at all. But now... now I'm not sure if that's still true.

“The emperor held back every other offer,”

Lady Elara says. “Perhaps he will pay the price for doing so. He thinks that Vex is a most loyal noble, and that he is being as cruel as only a nobleman can with you as your patron. Instead he is engaged in intrigues, seeking to overthrow the emperor.”

“The same as you,”

I say in a whisper. It is not truly safe to discuss such things here but we have nowhere else now.

“He is not the same as me,”

Lady Elara insists. “His little group is not interested in making life better for anyone

but themselves. They will punish the beast whisperers the same as the emperor. They are a group of nobles who have realized that they will never hold true power within the empire, and now they are looking for a way to put one of their number on the throne. That is all.”

Not so long ago, I would have agreed with her dismissal of Vex and his aims. Now though it all sounds worryingly similar to the kinds of things Lady Elara wants to achieve.

“And are you so different?”

I ask her.

She looks a little offended. “You really need to ask if I am different to someone like him. You know him. You know what he's like: arrogant, entitled, vicious when he needs to be. If he's charming, it's to get something.”

The trouble is, some of those qualities sound a lot like Lady Elara. She is undoubtedly charming, but there is always a point to it and a scheme behind it. She might not be as arrogant as Vex, but there is no denying that she is a noble woman, with all the expectations that the world will go her way that come with that. She is ruthless when she needs to be, and has encouraged me to be more ruthless, to embrace the more dangerous powers of the beast whisperers.

“What exactly are your intentions when... if you succeed in overthrowing the emperor?”

I ask her. “Will you free all the slaves of Aetheria? Will you feed the poor? You talk about change, but how much will you change things?”

She looks troubled. “Change is not easy. We will need to do things one step at a time.

Once all the beast whisperers are able to step from the shadows--”

“This isn't just about the beast whisperers,”

I insist. How can she not see that it's so much bigger than that? That the problems of the empire touch so many more people?

“We are the ones who have been persecuted,”

Lady Elara snaps back. “Until we deal with that, we cannot deal with anything else. Until we put one of our number on the throne, we cannot be safe.”

“Meaning you?”

I guess. “How exactly do you plan to take the throne? What are your plans?”

“My plans? Can you not trust me?”

I shake my head. “I need to know. What are you going to do?”

“Do you want some pretty lie, or do you want the truth?”

Lady Elara demands. “Can you stomach a real answer?”

“Tell me,” I insist.

“The beast whisperers around the city will call to the creatures of Aetheria. We will bring them out in a tidal wave that will sweep over the city and destroy our enemies. You will bring the crowds roaring into the streets. That is what we will do.”

I can see how that would turn out. Beasts sent out in unchecked violence will cause

carnage.

“That... so many people will die!” I say.

“They deserve it!”

Lady Elara snaps back. “This city is filled with people who have hated our kind. Who cares if a few of them die? We cannot rebuild this city until the old order has been reduced to ashes!”

The violence in her tone takes me aback. I had been thinking that Lady Elara’s rebellion might be the more reasonable choice of the options available to me, but now... she sounds as if her approach will be nothing but a slaughter.

“Has all of this just been about revenge for you?”

I demand. “I thought you wanted me to help you make things better.”

She doesn't quite push down this look of anger. “You should show a little more gratitude, Lyra. I have done so much for you. I have trained you. I have sought to protect you. And yet, now you're questioning my intentions. You should show a little more loyalty to your own kind. Do you think anyone else will protect us? Do you think Vex will?”

I go to answer that but she waves the attempt away.

“No, don't bother. I find this far too tiresome. I'm sure once you've had a chance to reflect, you realize what the correct side in all of this is. You will remember that you are where you are for a reason.”

“To stir up the people on your behalf,”

I say. “To keep them on your side. And the moment I do anything like that, Alaric dies.”

Alaric and so many others. I think of the people I saw on the street with Vex. How many of those people will be killed in this violence?

“People are going to die,”

Lady Elara says, as if it's simple and obvious. “He’s just one more noble among the rest of them. The first place the beasts will go are the noble houses. When they are ripped out of the city, maybe we can start again.”

“You... you’re insane.”

“If you think that, then you are a fool,”

Lady Elara says. “I only hope that when you think about it, you will come to a better conclusion. Now go please. It is worth the risk of being seen spending time with you when I think it might achieve something for the good of the city, but when all it does is irritate me further... no. Out.”

She dismisses me the way she might any other servant. Because I suspect that that's all I am to her. I suspect I'm a tool to be used to get the ends that she desires. Do I think she would be a better ruler than Vex? Than the gangs under Bella? Probably. Do I want to upend the entire empire, to risk Alaric’s life just so that she can slaughter half the city on her way to the throne? That is a very different question.

“Oh, and send the young woman, Cesca in when you go,”

Lady Elara says.

That is a very pointed thing to do. It is her way of showing how angry she is with me. It is the kind of thing that, if we were actually lovers, rather than working together against the empire, would be a deliberate insult, a slap in the face as she chooses someone else. The rumors will all say that's what's going on, that she has put me aside. It's her way of pushing me away, and I go.

Little by little the choices are becoming clearer. The trouble is none of them are good ones. The groups seeking to overthrow the emperor all seek different things but mostly they want to put their own people on the throne. Vex offers a version of the old order that promises to be every bit as brutal as the current emperor. Bella offers the chaos of the gangs if she is not contained. Lady Elara wants to unleash a torrent of beasts to ravage the city, then rule in the aftermath. That will create simple chaos, in which too many people will die.

There has to be another way through all this, but I cannot see it.

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I feel dejected when I return to Ironhold for the night. I'm being pulled in so many different directions that I fear I will be torn apart. I barely pay attention through Lord Darius's usual tribute to the slain, and head off alone to practice and keep out of the way of the others.

Cesca shoots me a triumphant smile as I do it, as if she believes she has won some kind of contest by catching Lady Elara's attention. I don't bother to correct her. If anything, this is probably good for me because it means she won't be coming at my back again in a hurry. She won't have any reason to, because Lady Elara wouldn't send her at me.

At least I think she wouldn't. If I stand against her, it's hard to tell how she'll react. It's clear that she will do anything for her cause, and if she decides I am in the way of that, then I may be an obstacle to be removed.

For now, at least, that is only a small part of my problems. I stand there at the practice posts, pretending to go over my fight but actually thinking more about the aftermath. Thinking about my conversation with Vex and the one that followed with Lady Elara.

I'm so busy thinking about it all that I barely notice as Rowan approaches.

"You look as though you have a lot on your mind," he says.

"I do but... it's related to everything we talked about before,"

I reply. I don't want to push him away further by talking about rebellion again.

“I need to apologize to you for that,”

Rowan says. “I saw your bout today. You shouldn't have had to fight alone like that. You should have people backing you up.”

“Even when it comes to something like rebellion?” I ask.

Rowan shakes his head. “I still don't want any part of something like that. I still think it's too dangerous for the people around us and for the ordinary folk. If you could give me a way that doesn't cost everyone so much, maybe, but for now...”

he shakes his head. “I still don't want to lose you as a friend and as an ally in here.”

He reaches out a hand and I take it, feeling his strength. There was a time when I would have felt the urge for more than just that, when his presence so close to me would have fired something in me demanding that I move into the circle of his arms. Not now, though. Now, it seems that only Alaric affects me that way.

“Do you want to talk about it all?”

Rowan asks me.

“It's going to be tricky to talk about everything that happened if you don't want to know any details related to the unrest,” I say.

“I can listen, at least,”

Rowan says. “Even if I don't want to risk my life as a part of it, that doesn't mean I don't want to help you. What is it that has you so distracted? The rumors say it's because Lady Elara has suddenly picked Cesca as a favorite, but somehow I doubt it's about that.”

I sigh. "My new patron is Vex."

Rowan looks worried at that. "He didn't do anything to hurt you, did he?"

He says it in a protective tone, but the truth is that if Vex had, there would be nothing either of us could do about it.

I shake my head. "No, he just took me out of the colosseum today to look around the city and see some of the things wrong with it. I saw the spots where people are being executed just for speaking out against corrupt officials. I saw the long lines of hungry people. In the crowds yesterday, there was someone who was shouting against the emperor's rule. There's so much wrong in Aetheria."

Rowan nods. "That isn't hard to see. But there have been things wrong in it for a long time. This is a city where the nobles own some of us outright and the rest in all but name. Where we are made to fight to the death. Where the common people go hungry."

In moments like this, he sounds as though he might be at the heart of a rebellion, but I can see why he's not. Rowan feels as though he has too much to lose.

"This feels different,"

I say. "It feels as though it's building up to something. Even the emperor seems to see it. That's why the games are so important to him now. He needs ways to distract the citizens. It's why he is forcing me to keep fighting."

"I still say that Alaric wouldn't want that for you,"

Rowan says.

“Maybe not, but he wouldn't want to die either,”

I counter.

“Do you think it would save him to throw your lot in with one of the sides?”

Rowan asks.

“I'm... not sure,”

I admit. Perhaps before I had spoken with Lady Elara today, I might have believed that she would do something to save Alaric. Now, though, it seems clear that she doesn't care about anything but getting revenge. Alaric is, at most, a sacrifice along the way. Exactly the kind of sacrifice I cannot allow. If anything, Vex is probably more likely to do something to save him, seeing Alaric as a fellow noble to be protected.

“That seems to me to be the problem with all of this,”

Rowan says. “There are lots of people who want your help, but none of them are clear about what they will do if they succeed.”

He has a point. It seems clear that Vex and his nobles merely want to replace one emperor with another. Some aspects of the system will change, and maybe that will be to the benefit of everyone but most things will remain the same. The nobles are not about to give away their slaves, or shut down the colosseum. Vex would be horrified by the very idea of that.

Is Lady Elara any better though with her beast whisperers? She has talked about making things better, but her methods will mean chaos and destruction on the streets, a wave of vengeance and blood. She will rebuild in the aftermath, and maybe things

will be better, but I cannot stomach what it will take to get there.

It seems to me that neither will be doing anything for the starving common folk. Vex might have shown me them but I doubt he will do more than the bare minimum for them. He will root out corruption among the officials, but that alone will not put food in the mouths of the poorest people of Aetheria.

“A gladiator named Bella asked me if I would be interested in joining an uprising,”

Rowan says. “Does that mean you've been building support here as well?”

I shake my head. “She has been doing that herself.”

I haven't talked to Rowan about her because I guessed he wouldn't be interested. Bella represents another faction I need to consider. It's obvious that her faction is closer to the common people of the city, but they also seem caught up with its gangs, far too willing to allow them free reign over the city.

“Have you noticed that they're all coming to you for your help?”

Rowan says.

“I guess I'm useful to them,” I say.

He looks at me for several seconds. “It's a little more than that, Lyra. There's the prophecy, for one thing.”

“Do you think the emperor is right?”

I ask Rowan. “That I am either to save the city or kill the emperor?”

Rowan nods. “That's one thing I have no doubt about. If anyone in this place is going to be at the heart of events, it's going to be you. And who said that saving the city and killing the emperor were opposites? I'm pretty sure that every group in the city right now thinks that killing Tiberius is exactly the way to save the city.”

The reality of those words hits me like a stone. I have been confused about what my role in this is going to be. The emperor's own prophecy seemed so confused that it was impossible to make sense of it. But this... could Rowan be right?

Even if it doesn't come to that, it feels as though I am on the edge of a blade, balancing carefully trying to pick my way to safety. One slip, and there will be blood. But what if I can't avoid the blood? What if my only choice is who bleeds, and why?

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I have no bouts in the arena the next day, which is a first for me. I have fought on every day of each set of games I have been a part of before this. This time, though, it seems that I am being saved for something special at the end. That is not a comforting thought, even if it means I will not have to risk my life today.

I cannot simply stay in Ironhold, either. It seems that I am required to go down into the city with the others, to be seen and to spend time among the nobles. It is a unique kind of ordeal, having to go there simply to be stared at by them. I'm still required to wear my arena armor, the patches of scale leaving plenty of flesh uncovered for them to see. I wait in the receiving rooms, standing there as if I am another of the servants who stand around the walls of the room waiting for commands.

I go to one of them, a young woman with golden hair and wide blue eyes. She is wearing a white dress that clings to her tightly, held in place by a golden belt. Like me, she has an iron collar around her neck, although unlike me, she does not have the brand of the colosseum on her left shoulder. Because she does not fight as a gladiator she can never get marks for seasons successfully completed. She will never be free, never even have a chance at it.

“What's your name?”

I ask her.

She looks surprised that I'm asking. “Salene, my lady.”

“I'm no one's lady,”

I say. "I'm just Lyra. Salene. What is it like being a servant here?"

She looks around, looking worried as if afraid that this is a test of some kind, designed to examine her loyalty.

"I do all that is commanded of me,"

she says. "I bring food and drink to the nobles. I... serve them in other ways if they require it."

"Does it make any difference to you who the emperor is?"

I ask her.

Now she looks truly frightened. "I serve Aetheria loyally. I would never say anything against the emperor."

"That's not what I'm asking,"

I say. "I want to know..."

What do I want to know? Who she would want as the emperor? Which way I should place my allegiance in the building tensions? It is unfair even to ask the questions, because if anyone overhears us, she will be punished for it.

"She won't say what you want to hear,"

Vex says. He steps into the receiving room. "Or rather, she will say any platitude you wish to hear, but she won't tell you the truth. I imagine she's too scared for that. Come away from her. I have someone rather better for you to talk to."

I feel tension running through me at his presence. In some ways it's good that he was the one to walk in and overhear us. At least Vex is as caught up in the possibility of rebellion as I am. If it had been anyone else, I might find myself being dragged before the emperor.

“Come with me,”

Vex says, gesturing for me to follow him as he leads the way from the receiving rooms. I follow in his footsteps, but I'm still suspicious of his intentions.

“Where are you taking me?”

I ask him.

Vex shrugs, smiling back over his shoulder at me. “You know, strictly speaking, a slave gladiator shouldn't be asking so many questions of her patron.”

“Well strictly speaking, you shouldn't be doing any of the things you're currently doing should you?”

I point out. He can hardly talk about what's correct and within the rules when he's plotting rebellion.

“True enough. Let's say that I have arranged something to show my good faith. I know what matters to you, Lyra, and I want to show you that I can give you it.”

He leads the way through the colosseum, heading up to the spaces that contain the noble boxes. I hope he isn't just planning to make me watch the fights with him. If there is one good thing about this day, it is that it will contain no violence for me.

Yet, as he opens the door to the box, I realize that he has indeed arranged the one

thing I want. Alaric is waiting in that box, along with a couple of guards, but they leave as soon as Vex goes to them and puts coins into their hands.

“Remember who you're with when the time comes,”

he murmurs to them. It's obvious that he has bought the loyalty of some of the guards, at least. The guards go to stand outside.

“They will keep watch on this box from outside,”

Vex says. “And I will be waiting to speak with you, Lyra. For now, the two of you probably have a lot to say... and do.”

He leaves and it is an agony waiting for him to leave so that I can throw myself forward to take Alaric in my arms and kiss him. He kisses me back with enthusiasm, and if we weren't in a space where there was a chance of being overlooked from outside, I suspect it would go a lot further. As it is, we both curl into one couch there in the box together, close in a way we have not been able to be since Alaric was taken.

“Since when is Vex enough of a friend to you to arrange something like this?”

Alaric asks me.

“He's my new patron,” I say.

Alaric looks troubled by that. He knows how much Vex has hated me in the past, as much as anyone.

“He's doing it to show me that he can,”

I say. "To show me that he can help me save you, I think."

Alaric looks troubled by my words. "If he's telling you that, don't believe him. It's one thing to bribe a couple of guards to give us some time alone together. Another to do more than that. They still serve the emperor."

"I'm... not so sure," I say.

Alaric frowns. "What do you mean, Lyra?"

I don't want to tell him too much right now. The emperor has him, which means he could force Alaric's mind to be read at any point by a suitably powerful psychomancer. It is better if he doesn't know all the details of what is happening.

"Let's just say the things aren't very stable right now,"

I say. "That isn't the part that matters. What matters is whether you're safe."

"As safe as I can be,"

Alaric says. "They haven't told me much, just that there has been a stay of execution for now. Although the fact I'm here rather than in a prison cell is... confusing. Are you telling me that Vex did this somehow?"

"The emperor did that,"

I say. "I had to beg him, and... he agreed that as long as I keep fighting in the arena, you will be safe."

"No!"

Alaric says, sharp and sudden, standing as he does so. He looks shocked by my words, by what I have chosen to do. “Lyra, you can’t.”

“I have,”

I say. “If I don’t, then they will kill you.”

“Then let them kill me!”

Alaric says, storming now around the box as if he might find a way out.

“I can’t do that,” I say.

“And do you think I can stand here and watch you fight again and again until you die?”

Alaric asks. “No. This is a stupid thing to do, Lyra.”

I’m taken aback by the force in his voice. I had thought he would be pleased to know that he would get to keep living. My arrangement with the emperor is far from perfect, but at least it means that Alaric will not be executed.

“This is just temporary,” I say.

“Until when?”

Alaric replies. “Until you can find a way to break me out of here? Trust me, I’ve looked. There isn’t one. And even if there were, then what?”

“We would run away somewhere,” I say.

“And spend the rest of our lives on the run?”

Alaric says. He comes over to me and takes me by the arms, looking me deep in the eyes. “Even if we weren't caught, it would mean giving up everything. I went into the games for honor and glory, for status. Out in the world, we would be nothing.”

“Would that be so bad?” I ask.

He laughs then, with more bitterness in that laugh than I had imagined he could hold.

“If you think I can live without being the center of attention, you don't know me, Lyra Thornwind.”

“Don't do that,”

I say. It hurts too much to see him acting like this.

“Don't do what?”

Alaric counters, even though he must know.

“Don't put your usual mask up here,”

I say. “Don't pretend you don't feel anything, or hide everything behind humor.”

“It's better if I do,”

Alaric says. “There are some things you won't want to hear.”

“There's nothing you can say that will drive me away,” I say.

He looks at me. I can see the tension in his face, as if he's debating what to do next within.

“How about if I tell you that I wish I hadn't interfered with Callus?” he says.

The shock of that takes the breath from me. Alaric saved my life with Callus. If he hadn't, I would be dead now.

“You don't mean that,” I say.

“Why not?”

Alaric says. “You're planning to throw your life away fighting again and again until the emperor gets bored with you. At least if Callus had killed you, I wouldn't be stuck here facing execution the moment you fail.”

He puts more venom behind the words than I could imagine being within him. He throws them at me like a weapon.

“At least this way we can still-”

“No!”

Alaric snaps. “Do you think I want to be stuck here waiting for you to come to me for brief romantic moments, like some courtesan waiting at the whim of a noble? Do you think that's what the rest of my life is worth? I will not see you again, Lyra. I won't allow another moment like this.”

“Alaric-”

“If you have any sense, you will do the one thing you can: you will forget me. You

will go out there, win the games, and you will allow me to be executed. Then you will finish your seasons on the sand and you will get out of the colosseum. If you don't do that, Lyra, don't expect there to be anything between us. I'm certainly not running away to some vile little fishing village with you. Now get out of here. Get out!"

He's being loud enough that I know other guards will come soon. It means I must leave even though my heart feels as though it's about to break. How can Alaric treat me like this? How can he push me away so completely? I had hoped for some grand reunion between us, but this is the opposite of everything I wanted.

I flee the box, but Vex is waiting for me. I move to push past him, but he stops me. I almost lash out on instinct with my powers, starting to reach for the mind of the shadow cat to summon it to me and rip him apart.

"I'm guessing the reunion didn't go as well as I hoped?" he says.

"Be very careful what you say next, Vex,"

I say, and there is enough of a promise of violence in my tone that he steps back.

"You have seen him, but you have also seen the impossibility of this situation,"

Vex says. "You can't fight forever. You don't want it. He doesn't want it. I can give you more. If you help me and my side prevails, then I will pardon Alaric and set him free. You will both be free and together. I can give you that. The emperor will not."

Those words cut through my heartbreak and anger. They're enough to make me listen, at least briefly.

"And what do you want?" I ask.

“Let's start with one simple piece of information. Currently the budding rebellion is too fractured, split between too many sides. I know that there are others who also plan to seize power, and they could be dangerous. I believe that you know the location of the spectral covenant. Their activities get in the way of ours. So, if you decide you want to go with my side, that is the piece of information you need to give me to prove that you are loyal to it.”

“You're asking me to betray them?”

I say. I shake my head instantly.

“That is what I want, Lyra. If you want to save Alaric, that is the price.”

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The worst part is that even when I feel as though my heart is breaking, I cannot simply go off and be alone. I try to go down to the beast pits but the trainers there quickly point me back in the direction of the receiving rooms, making it clear that I have duties to attend to.

I go up there with tears in my eyes, trying to hold back the emotions I feel from my face but knowing that it is no use. I have never been able to disguise my emotions well, and now it feels as though I am a dam with cracks spreading across me, unable to hold back the tide of pain that waits behind.

I sit in a corner of the receiving rooms, and occasionally nobles come to me. They quickly back away. It's as if they can sense the pain and the anger within me, and they leave as quickly as they might with an angry hunting hound. I am alone in the receiving rooms, at least for now.

How could Alaric say any of the things he has? How could he drive me away so completely? He will refuse to see me? That feels like a knife being driven through my ribs. I'm doing all of this for him. I made my deal with the emperor to keep him alive. Everything I have done has been to ensure that we can still be together and now he does not want to be.

I'm starting to suspect that the things I have seen behind the mask of his arrogance were never really there at all. All the tenderness and the love, the hurt and the gentleness seem so far away now.

I sit there, listening to the sounds of the arena from the outside. Those filter in through the walls so that I can hear the roar of the crowd and the cries of pain. A

beast roars, and I reach out automatically, looking through the eyes of the birds around the stadium. I have the power to see everything now, but it just means that I see the moment when a small group of criminals is torn apart by an angry chimera, their blood spraying across the sand. I watch the faces of the nobles and the crowd, seeing the primal emotions there, the bloodlust and the savage joy at the death of others.

I hate that. I hate the way they look on while others are killed for their amusement. The chimera is slowly tearing into the abdomen of one man and he is crying out for help but no one is giving it to him.

I can help him, although help is hardly the word for it. I reach into the chimera's mind almost without thinking about it and have the beast slash its claws across the criminal's throat. I can do nothing to save him, but at least I can give him a death that is not filled with agony. I leave the chimera behind, abandoning its mind and returning to my body. I do not want to watch whatever bouts are to come next. I am sick of the death and the violence.

A part of me wonders if Alaric is right. That is one reason why his words hurt so much: because he might have a point. What kind of life am I giving the two of us by agreeing to the emperor's terms? I have agreed to an existence where I will need to fight for the rest of what is likely to be a short life, while he will be a prisoner, who only lives so that the emperor can control me. I'm sure the emperor will give me time with him, but it is clear Alaric does not want that time now. Perhaps he never will. The situation seems designed to drive us apart, each of us resenting the other for our situation.

How could he say that he wished Callus had killed me?

That is one of the worst hurts of all. Alaric seems to have the knack of knowing exactly where to hurt me most, exactly which words will affect me to the greatest

degree. He has literally wished me dead. How can any relationship between us survive such a thing?

And even that part is true. If Alaric had not helped me, if I had died, would either of us really be worse off now? I'm still going to die if the emperor gets his way. I'm going to have to fight with no hope of ever making it out of the colosseum, and ultimately that is a death sentence. At some point I will be too slow or too weak, too injured or just not lucky enough to come through one of my bouts. I have seen so many strong gladiators die out there in the colosseum. Do I really think that I will be any different?

And Alaric... if he had not helped me, then he would be free of all of this right now. He would have a place of honor out in Aetherian society, probably with a marriage to some wealthy noble woman. Even his family would be forced to acknowledge his success. Instead, he is kept as a prisoner, and he will die the moment I fail. I have not saved him from execution, merely delayed the moment when it will come.

I'm still thinking about it when a figure comes over to me, a noble woman in her forties, with dark hair and fine features that have a faint hint of familiarity to them. She wears an expensive gown, along with bangles and rings that proclaim her wealth.

For a moment I assume this is another noble coming to me to try to be seen along with one of the successful gladiators of the games, or perhaps to try to for more. I cannot openly rebuff her, but I can give her a hard look that makes it clear I'm not interested in any company at the moment. It has worked so far.

“You must be Lyra,”

she says, ignoring the look and sitting down next to me on the couch.

“Forgive me my lady I am...”

I struggle for the words to tell her that I don't want to talk to anyone right now, trying to find some way to say it that won't earn me punishment. Although maybe I should just come out and say it like that and accept the punishment. At least then, the pain would match what I feel inside.

“I am Lillian Blackthorn,” she says.

That name catches me by surprise as I realize why she looks faintly familiar. Her features have echoes of Alaric’s face. This is the patron he has been seeing in secret. This is his mother.

That fact is enough to get me to sit there, although I don't know what I can say to her.

“I guess you must hate me,”

I say. After all, if it weren't for me, her precious son would not be held, awaiting execution.

She puts her hand on my shoulder, a surprising amount of sympathy in her eyes.

“How could I hate you when my son cares about you so much?”

I laugh bitterly. “I'm not sure he feels the same way right now. He told me that he wished he had let me die and that I should do the same for him.”

I hear her sigh. “Alaric always was dramatic. And he knows how to wield words. You realize that if he said something like that, it was for a reason, not because he meant it.”

“What reason could he have that excuses that?” I ask.

She smiles gently. "I heard what you did for him. I heard about you agreeing to keep fighting. The rumors about that are starting to flow out. The emperor is letting the right people know before he announces it to the crowd, so that they can all bet on the outcome. His way of rewarding loyalty."

"And you're loyal to him?" I ask.

"He let me know so that I would know my son is not going to be killed straight away,"

she says. "Another way of ensuring that loyalty."

Holding him as a hostage over the rest of his family as much as over me. It just shows how twisted the situation is, but I'm not sure it helps with anything.

"Alaric is trying to be noble and give you a way out,"

Lillian says. "And if he has been cruel my guess is that he has done it deliberately to try and make you take this way out. To make it less painful for you. You've seen, I guess, that he's an expert in putting on the mannerisms of the arrogant and unfeeling nobleman when he wants to."

"I have," I admit.

"Then you will also have seen that there is far more beneath it. He pretends that he is not, but Alaric is someone who feels everything deeply. When he is hurt, it is to the bone. When he loves, it is with all his heart. Do not doubt what he feels for you. He's trying to be selfless, trying to throw his life away as if it's nothing, but we both know it matters so much more than that."

"I..."

I nod. I know she's right, just as I know I can't simply walk away, rejecting the emperor's offer and allowing Alaric to die. I cannot go back to Seatide and watch the empire devour itself from a safe distance. At the same time, though, I know that I cannot keep fighting forever.

I need another option. I need an option that will allow me to save Alaric, to free myself, and to do more than that. I want to make things better for everyone trapped in the games, everyone in the city, and the empire.

I'm not sure that any of the sides who have come to me are offering that. I don't think I can trust Lady Elara anymore, not with the horrors she plans to unleash. I know I can't trust Vex. As for Bella... I cannot allow the wildfire of mob violence either. Oh, and the emperor is still waiting for me to hand him his foes.

I need to find my own way, for Alaric's sake, for mine, and for that of everyone in the city.

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I sit there, trying to work my way through the tangled web of the problems facing me. It seems obvious that I cannot continue the way the emperor wants me to. Doing so only buys time, but does nothing to save either myself or Alaric.

I sit there silently in the receiving room, looking around at the nobles and at the servants who must obey them. There are other gladiators in here as well, while I can hear the sounds of the crowd. It will not be long before the end of the day and if I'm going to do anything I should probably do it now. Tomorrow will be the last day of these games, then after that I will be shut away in Ironhold, with fewer chances to achieve anything.

I think about the twin pillars of Aetheria: martial virtue and magical might. Those are the foundations of the city, but there are more sources of power than just those. The people of this city are every bit as important as its magic or its warriors.

I think I can see a way through this, but I know that neither Vex nor Lady Elara will be happy about it. Each will attempt to take power as soon as anything happens, and they may have enough strength to succeed in doing so.

I know what I need to do. I go to Salene the servant, hoping that the reputation I've built up through the games will be enough to get her to do what I want.

“Excuse me, would you inform my patron, Vex, that I wish to speak with him if it's convenient? Tell him that I am ready to give him what he wants.”

I frame it as the kind of polite request that any gladiator might make down here in the receiving rooms. To the servant, it probably sounds as if I'm ready to offer myself up

to Vex, but he will know what I mean when he hears it.

The servant nods and hurries off, leaving me to wait. Vex comes to me quickly, ushering me into a side room. “You've decided to be reasonable then?” he says.

I nod. “You're my best chance of getting Alaric out of this alive.”

“I will do everything I can for him,”

Vex promises, although that's a long way from promising that he will keep him alive regardless of what happens. Vex may have a very different idea of what everything he can do entails than me. “Do you have the information I requested?”

“The spectral covenant meets in an ancient temple of the goddess Deira, beneath the city,”

I say. “They will be meeting tonight.”

“I will need directions to it,” Vex says.

“I can draw you a map if you get me something to write with.”

He nods and leaves the room for a minute or two before coming back with parchment and ink. I draw him his map, describing the way through the tunnels beneath the city. This is a betrayal of the beast whisperers, and I know it. They rely on secrecy to stay safe, but I have made my choice and must go through with it. I think I have found a way through this, but every step now will need to be perfect.

I draw Vex his map. I hand it to him, and he hurries off, obviously determined to put an end to his competition for the empire. It means he's abandoned me with the ink and the parchment, so I take the time to write a simple note.

Vex is coming for the spectral covenant. He knows where you are.

I take that note and I cannot risk it with a servant, so I step out into the open air and I call a bird to me. I have it take the note in its beak, then guide it in a search for Lady Elara. I find her in her box, looking out over the crowd and the empire as if trying to judge which parts she will keep and which must be destroyed by the beast whisperers. She looks up as the bird approaches, obviously sensing that I have control of it. I drop the note in front of her, then let my control of the bird fade.

I have talked to two of those I need to, but there is still a third, and he is more dangerous than the others put together. For this one I do not go to a servant, but instead approach a guard.

“I have information I believe the emperor will want to hear,”

I say, trying not to show any of the fear I feel at what I'm about to do. This is a betrayal on a scale that I cannot justify for any reason other than love. If I did not love Alaric so much I would not be able to do any of this, would not be able to contemplate what I'm about to do.

The guard looks surprised, but I am one of the foremost gladiators of the games, and I have been brought before the emperor many times before. They are used to taking me to him, and in this case, the promise of information is a useful bargaining tool. The guard leads me through the colosseum to the emperor's box, where Emperor Tiberius is sitting watching the games from his throne. He looks around as I enter.

“What are you doing here Lyra?”

he demands, as I fall to my knees, the way I am required to in front of him.

“I have information my emperor. But...”

“You want something for it,”

he says, his eyes locking onto mine. He gestures for the guards to leave. He clearly doesn't fear being here alone with me. He knows I cannot act against him.

“I want you to promise me that Alaric will never be executed,”

I say. “I want you to give him his freedom.”

“What information could possibly be worth that?”

the emperor says.

“I can give you the people plotting against you,” I say.

A look of interest crosses his face. “The spectral covenant?”

“Not just them,”

I say. “There is a group of nobles who wish to unseat you for their own reasons. They are planning to meet up with the spectral covenant tonight.”

His look of interest turns into one of hunger. “Tell me where they will be.”

“First, you need to give me assurances that Alaric will be safe,”

I say. “Not just safe for now, but permanently.”

“You're trying to bargain with me? I could have you taken to a torture chamber and get every scrap of information from your mind.”

“Could you do it in time?”

I counter. “Alaric’s safety.”

The emperor doesn't look happy, but he nods. “Very well. But I feel I should give you a choice. Tomorrow is to be a battle royale between the gladiators who remain in the games. I could remove you from that, take away the risk to your life. Alaric is in no immediate danger. I have been keeping him at my palace. I could give you your life as a reward, rather than his.”

It is a cruel choice to give me a moment of deliberate pain to inflict on me. Or it would be if I thought of it as a choice at all.

“Alaric’s safety is more important to me,” I say.

The emperor looks as though he cannot quite understand that, but he nods again. “As you say. If this works out, then his life will no longer be on the line. I may even choose to release him.”

May. That word makes it clear that the emperor plans to do as little as he can, but I have done what I can to keep Alaric safe. More than that, I know where he is being held now.

“Now tell me where and when the spectral covenant and these nobles will meet.”

I tell him. I draw for him the same map that I drew for Vex, albeit with a few subtle differences. I give him the information he will need to send soldiers in to attack those plotting against him. I betray Lady Elara, and Vex, all at once.

I just hope it will be enough.

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I sit in my cell in Ironhold that night and I reach out with my mind, wanting to know that what I have achieved is going to be enough. It is dark outside, and I know that soon the first steps of my plan will start to come to fruition.

I stretch my powers, leaping into the mind of a night flying bat. I guide it through the darkness, seeing with both eyes and ears, the world a place of echoes and shadows. What I do tonight will require me to connect to this animal at a distance further than I have state connected to one before. Yet I believe it to be possible because Lady Elara has sent birds to me in the past. If she can maintain control at such a distance, I believe that I must be able to.

I guide the bat down into the city, searching for the ways into the crypts beneath it. Aetheria is built on centuries of its own past, layers of the city that have been forgotten, sewers and tunnels, crypts and hidden places. I find a way in for the bat, but I do not stick to its mind. Instead, I use it as a point from which to reach out further, feeling for more minds beneath the city.

This is something I have not been taught how to do. It is something I am having to feel the way to do, working it out as I go. I can feel the minds of small animals as they move beneath Aetheria. Small animals and larger ones too. The beast whisperers like to keep some of the beasts they have tamed down near the temple. I can feel the small minds of rats and spiders, the harsh predatory mind of a crocodile, and several stranger things.

I split my attention between them, balancing myself as I look through their eyes, careful never to lose touch with own being. I borrow sight in a dozen or more different ways, seeing the world in different shades and from different angles. I hear

as well, hearing the conversation of the beast whisperers.

“We should run, Elara!”

a voice says.

“No, if we run, we will never stop running. Our rebellion will be over before it begins. Lyra has betrayed us, but she has also given us a chance to succeed. She has told us that our enemies are coming. We can make use of that.”

I do not dare get too close to them. I know that if I do there is too much of a risk that they will sense my power riding on the animals. They will know I am watching, and it may be that they're able to retaliate.

“Why would she do this?”

a man's voice asks.

“She's trying to save the noble young man she's so besotted with,”

Lady Elara says. “Maybe our enemies threatened him. Or maybe they just got a hold of her and beat the information from her. It's hard to say for sure. She will pay you for what she's done in due course.”

“But why tell us?”

The man insists.

“Maybe she's trying to make up for that betrayal, or maybe she has some idea that we will run. Maybe this is her idea of mercy. You all know how attached she is to that concept. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we are ready. Go to your positions.”

I switch between the eyes of different animals, watching the beast whisperers as they spread out in the spaces beneath the earth, ready for the fights to come. Lady Elara stands at the center of the temple of Deira, both in challenge to anyone coming and as a way of luring them closer.

I can see the others making their way along the passageways: a mixture of nobles, soldiers whose loyalty they have bought, and retainers. Some of them hold flames in their hands to light the way. Others crackle with lightning. Vex is there, blades already floating around him ready for use.

I could still put an end to this, still call it all off by controlling something that can talk and shouting a warning. I don't. I can't. If I give the different sides any warning now, my whole plan will fall apart. There is only one way out of this for me, for Alaric, and for the people of Aetheria. This is the only option, as painful as it is to sit and watch it all.

I see the moment when Vex and the others supporting him burst into the temple, ready for violence. Lady Elara stands there in front of them, her arms spread wide.

“You?”

Vex says, obviously not quite believing it. “You're connected to the spectral covenant.”

“Not just connected to it, my dear,”

Lady Elara says. “I lead it. And you are here to try to crush us.”

“It doesn't have to be that way,”

Vex says. “You can submit to us. You would be useful servants in the fight against

the emperor. Do that, and I will let you live.”

“You'll let me live?”

Lady Elara says. She laughs then, and as she laughs, I see figures detaching themselves from hidden places, partly hidden by her illusions.

The spectral covenant charges at those who would destroy them, roaring and shrieking as they come.

The two sides attack each other in a sudden blaze of violence. Beast whisperers leap out from their hiding places, catching Vex's forces by surprise. Animals charge forward alongside them, starving hounds, big cats, even one of the crocodiles that stalks the tunnels.

They are prepared for this moment and Vex is not. It means that they slam into his forces with sickening violence, teeth and claws rending. In just seconds, the world seems to be filled with blood and death. I see a nobleman brought down by a beast whisperer whose hands turn to claws to disembowel him. I see the jaws of a crocodile clamp down on the leg of a mercenary soldier.

Vex is the first one to fight back, sending his knives singing through the air to plunge into flesh, bringing down people and animals alike. For all the power of the beast whisperers, they are not invulnerable, and several are brought down in that first rush of combat. Vex has brought allies with him with their own powers, and now the air is filled with the crackle of lightning and with bursts of flame.

The beast whisperers have some advantages, because they know the territory, know all the best hiding spots, and they have had time to bring animals to their side. That is good. It was part of my reason for telling them the danger was coming. If I had not, there was too much of a chance they would simply be wiped out.

Instead though I have sparked a bloody battle. Lady Elara wades through it, manipulating her illusions to try to distract her enemies even as she sends creatures against them. A flock of bats flies at the nobles, sharp teeth ready to bite until Vex sends his knives to intercept them.

“Hit and move!”

Lady Elara commands. At least some of the beast whisperers obey, running back into the tunnels, drawing the nobles and their allies forward. By drawing them out, they're able to bring them into more ambushes. This is far from the easy victory Vex was hoping for.

They start to pull back from one another, as if realizing that they're evenly matched. My fear is that they will be able to put aside their differences and work together, at least for now. I do not know if Lady Elara would lead such an alliance or if Vex would, but I'm sure it would not be good for the city either way.

Thankfully the emperor's forces choose that moment to attack, ambushing both sides at once. The emperor has sent guards, but even they have powers of their own, some with elements flickering on their blades, some conjuring lights so there is no way to hide. If the battle was relenting a moment ago now it is a thing of utter chaos with losses on every side.

“Flee!”

Lady Elara calls out to the others. “We cannot fight everyone. Get to safety!”

She uses illusions to hide herself just as blades slammed through the spot where she was standing. I can see them miss her through the eyes of a spider that I send scuttling on the wall after her. I see her turn to that spider, and fear builds in me as I realize that she has sensed my presence there.

“You did this,”

she snarls. “I gave you everything and you betrayed me. I will kill you for this, Lyra.”

She slams her foot into the spider, and I feel a sudden burst of pain as if it were my own body bursting apart. I am flung back to myself, was thrown out of the heads of the animals I am looking through. The jarring impact of that is enough to send me stumbling to the floor.

The die is cast. I have betrayed both of the sides that offered me their help. I have given the emperor everything.

But I know he will not be grateful. I doubt he will live up to his word at all. He plans tomorrow to throw me into a battle against my fellow gladiators. And if he preserves Alaric’s life, it will only be temporary.

That is why there is another part of my plan. Forcing myself to my feet I leave my cell, hunting through Ironhold. I can hear the sounds of partying, those gladiators who have finished their fights celebrating. There is drinking and music, although still not on the scale that it would be at the conclusion of the games.

I head through all of it, reaching out to the animals of the fortress until I see who I'm looking for. I find her in the middle of the dining hall, surrounded by other gladiators. I make my way there, weaving through the crowd of them, avoiding the ones who want to pull me into dancing or into some drunken embrace.

There are no guards here, and that's a good thing. They've obviously decided to leave us to our own devices for the night. They will watch on the walls as usual. I look over to where the chalkboard stands. Tomorrow's bout has already been put up. A dozen names. Mine is up there. So is Bella's and Cesca's. So is Rowan's. We are all to fight until only one of us stands. The emperor is going to spend our lives in a moment of

spectacle.

Some of them stand close to it, staring at it as if they cannot believe it. Bella is among them. I go to them all.

“You've seen what happens now,”

I say. “The emperor doesn't care about any of you. He means to have us fight to the death until only one of us remains. Entertaining the crowd has always counted for more than anything to him.”

Bella looks over to me. “That sounds as though you're ready to join my side in all this.”

I shake my head. “Your way of doing things is about tearing down everything you can, hurting as many nobles as possible. I don't want that. I'm not joining you. You're all joining me.”

She looks surprised by that, although not as surprised as Rowan.

“What are you doing, Lyra?”

he demands. “I've told you I don't want any part of some rebellion.”

“What's the alternative?”

I ask him. “We all fight until one of us is left? What happens when it's just you and me left, Rowan? Somehow, I doubt the emperor will let you get away with faking your death again.”

He looks troubled by that.

“You've seen the way things are in the streets,”

I say. “You all have. You all want to be free, to get through your five seasons and walk out of here. But tomorrow, only one of us will get to live. I'm proposing a way where we all have at least a chance of surviving.”

“I could go to the guards,”

Cesca says.

“You could,”

I reply. “And then they would kill me, and you would still have to fight. Do you really think you're going to be the last one standing tomorrow?”

She looks sheepish.

“I know why you do the things you do, Cesca,”

I say. “The same reason so many people around here. You want to be safe. But there is no safety as long as we are trapped in this place.”

“You're talking about escape?”

Bella asks.

I shake my head. “No, I'm thinking about something much bigger.”

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Morning, and I hope I have done the right thing. My actions last night got people killed. I set three sides against one another, and now my hope is that a fourth will work with me.

Today is the day when everything either goes right or my world comes tumbling down around me. If I fail today, dying will be the least that happens to me. If I am captured by the emperor's forces, or by either of the other sides, I can expect a death out of nightmares. No one ran to the guards last night, but that doesn't mean they won't be waiting for us later. There are still far too many chances for something to go wrong here.

We have tried to bring as many people on our side as we can, and Bella says that her people will be ready, but there are other parts to this that need to go right. I'm guessing that I can make it work, but what if I'm wrong?

No, I can't think like that. The time for doubts is past.

Everything proceeds as it normally would on the final day of the games, but I can feel the tension in the air building as the gladiators process down to the arena. Each of us is on edge, and not just because of the bout that awaits some of us. A battle royale to the last gladiator standing is an incredibly dangerous and wasteful kind of fight, where too many gladiators will die for too brief a burst of entertainment. It is obvious the emperor has ordered this both to try to quell the unrest among his citizens and to make sure that those gladiators who have displeased him such as myself have the greatest chance of dying.

I can see signs of fighting in the capital as we make our way down into it, suggesting

that the battles between the nobles, the beast whisperers and the soldiers have broken onto the streets. There are more burnt-out houses, suggesting spots where the fighting has been intense, yet it seems the games are going to go ahead as normal. I assumed that would be the case. I am betting on it.

We are brought down to the colosseum, paraded before the crowd, and taken below to wait. There is only one bout today, but the rest of the gladiators have been brought anyway, presumably to entertain the nobles in the receiving rooms. I hope when the moment comes, they will be able to do their part. I look over to where Rowan is standing with his armor and weapons in place. He looks determined. I go to him.

“I'm sorry I pushed you into this,”

I whisper.

“No, don't be sorry. You're right. It isn't enough for me to fight just for myself or even my sisters. We must fight for everyone.”

He takes my hand. “Whatever happens. I'm glad I knew you, Lyra Thornwind.”

It sounds far too much like he's saying goodbye to me.

I am given my spear and my net, along with my small curved dagger. I wait with the others, and then we are marched out into the colosseum.

“Citizens of Atheria,”

the emperor says. “Last night, a plot was discovered against our empire. It was stopped by my guards, and those responsible for it will soon be brought to justice.”

That suggests that his guards weren't able to destroy Vex's faction completely, or

Lady Elara's beast whisperers. If he could have, he would have brought them into the colosseum to kill them publicly. At least some of them must have survived, but I saw the losses that all sides suffered. I look around the arena now. Are there as many guards as usual? I'm not sure there are. How many of those died in the fighting?

"To celebrate that triumph, I give to you a battle such as has never been witnessed in this arena before. Not one gladiator against one, not pairs of them, but a whole horde of them, fighting until only one remains standing. They do this for the glory of the empire!"

The crowd cheers that but I can see that some of them look uncomfortable at it. They know as well as I do that such a mass battle will result in the death of many gladiators. Whoever their favorite is among us, that gladiator is as likely to be struck down as anyone else in the chaos.

The emperor doesn't seem to care. He only wants the spectacle, and to him we are all replaceable.

"Begin!"

the emperor commands.

But we do not begin. We do not do what he wants. Instead, we stand together in a ring of steel, facing outwards, ready to deal with the threat we know will be coming soon. The emperor will not tolerate this long.

"I commanded you to begin,"

the emperor says. "You will do it, or my guards will come down to deal with you. You can fight one another the way I command, or you can find yourselves executed for your failures."

Venom drips from his voice as he makes the threat. I know he will make good on it if he can, and I know that a dozen gladiators is not enough to stand up to every guard in the colosseum. But this is not just about the dozen of us standing here, or even about the others who even now will be starting to seize weapons and move from within the colosseum's interior.

No, this is about far more than that. I step forward, raising my voice.

“Citizens of Aetheria! You know me. I am Lyra Thornwind! Some of you call me the mistress of beasts. You have been taught to fear me as you have all other beast whisperers. Maybe many of you know why: because the emperor had a vision that a beast whisperer might bring him down. He let me live because actually he doesn't know whether I'm going to kill him or save this city.”

I look around at them slowly.

“I say, why not both?”

I give that a moment to sink in before I continue.

“I say that Aetheria does need to be saved. It needs to be saved from the emperor and from all those who would be an emperor. Last night I put a stop to two plots that would have seen other people on the throne, but I did not do it for Emperor Tiberius's benefit. I did it for all of you!”

I can hear the murmurs starting in the crowd, the people talking among themselves, trying to make sense of this.

“The spectral covenant of beast whisperers wanted revenge for the years they have been held down. They would have unleashed animal fury on the city. A plot by the former gladiator Vex would have seen him as emperor. He would have put you all

beneath his heel in the name of order.”

“Be silent!”

the emperor commands, but I ignore him and keep going. If I stop now, I am going to die. We all will.

“You have seen me bleed on this sand, and you have watched me kill. You have stood there and watched, because that's what the emperor wants you to do. He wants to entertain you so that you do not think about his rule for too long. So you don't think about the way he feeds the life force of the young men and women of this empire into the stones that power its magic. How many people here have lost friends, family to such brutality?”

I gesture to the emperor with my spear. “You could stand by and watch today. Your emperor is going to send his soldiers at us. You can stand and watch as twelve gladiators are cut down by the guards, although we will make them pay a fearsome price for it. Or you can stand up and take this city back from the man who has let families starve and executed any who spoke against him.”

There are cheers from the crowd now. Among them I can hear a single word repeated. A name. My name.

“Lyra! Lyra! Lyra!”

Lady Elara had planned to use me in just this way. She knew that if I could become loved by the crowd I could stir them up, get them on our side. But she saw it as a cynical manipulation, a way to get them to put beast whisperers in charge until they could take their revenge. I do not want to manipulate the crowd into being on my side. I want them to realize that all of the gladiators here in the colosseum are on theirs.

“Enough of this!”

The emperor calls out.

I shout over him. “Yes, enough. Enough tyranny. Enough of emperors who control us and force everyone in the empire to bend to their will. Enough of standing by while evil reigns in Aetheria. Rise up, all of you! Rise up and fight back against the emperor!”

A roar comes back from the crowd, and now people are on their feet, throwing things at guards, at nobles, at the emperor’s box.

The emperor is on his feet too. He points at me. “Guards, kill them all! And bring me Lyra Thornwind!”

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My heart hammers in my chest as guards rush into the colosseum, far more than just our dozen gladiators.

They don't just have numbers on their side. They are heavily armored, in a way that we are not, since our armor is designed to protect our more vital areas, while leaving enough flesh on display to allow more blood in the fights. They are armed in a more uniform way, with short swords and large square shields, allowing them to move forward in tight formation.

And they have magic of their own. One makes flames flicker along the edge of his blade. Another tries to throw shadows at us, forcing us to duck or be blinded by them.

But we are gladiators and we have done nothing but train to fight for season after season in the colosseum. This is where we are used to fighting. We know this ground, know the sand beneath our feet. If the crowd is screaming in terror and roaring its defiance now, rather than calling out our names, that makes no difference.

We charge into the fray. I swing my net, pulling down the shield of one of the guards, giving Rowan an opening in which he can attack. I see Cesca touch her blade to the metal armor of a foe, sending him back with a jolt of lightning through it. I see Bella leap at another of the guards, using the air itself like a shield to deflect his blows while she attacks.

We cut into the first wave of them like a storm, but there are more following behind. We cannot just burst through them and out into the colosseum's building. A guard swings at my head and I sway back from the blow just in time, but another slams his shield into me sending me sprawling. I thrust blindly with my spear, stabbing into the

leg of one of them as they try to follow up, then scramble back to my feet.

An arrow flashes past me, and one of the gladiators clutches his shoulder as it slams into him. He throws a rock back in return, the projectile moving as quickly as if he had thrown it using a sling. The guard who fired the arrow goes down, and I keep pressing forwards.

I reach for the sight of the birds around the stadium, determined to see what's going on. In the chaos of the general melee on the sands, I need to be able to see behind myself as well as in front. Because I can see from every angle, I spot a blade coming from my back. I reversed my spear and thrust it beneath the breastplate of the guard advancing on me, bringing him down.

I see more than that, though. I see chaos starting to break out in the stands, as the poorest throw whatever they can find at the guards, and a wave of people tries to get up towards the boxes of the nobles. More gladiators are coming up from the spaces within the colosseum. They have grabbed weapons and are fighting for their freedom now. Guards and the trainers fight back against them.

Pain blossoms in my shoulder, an agony of fire as I see Lord Darius standing there in the emperor's box, concentrating. Around me all the gladiators are crying out in pain or clutching their shoulders as the master of the games uses the same power that he has used to brand us previously to burn our flesh now. I see one gladiator run through by a guard as he grabs his shoulder in pain, and I barely avoid the thrust of another blade.

The gladiator who threw the rock before flings another now, forcing Lord Darius to dodge back. Those of us who can attack at a distance do so, bombarding the box in which the master of the games stands with every power we have. His concentration broken the burning fades from our shoulders, and now I'm able to resume the fight, sweeping my net around to trip a soldier from his feet leaving him vulnerable to the

thrust of another blade.

Through the eyes of the birds I can see the emperor retreating from his box, ushered out of it by Lord Darius, by Selene Ravenscroft, and by the closest of his guards. They are escaping, getting out from the middle of the violence. I move to follow, but another figure intercepts me, leaping down lightly from the edge of the colosseum onto the sands.

Vex stands there, his floating daggers already buzzing around him like angry bees.

“You betrayed me!”

he snarls. “You could have had everything.”

“You would have given the ordinary people of Aetheria nothing,” I say.

Vex sends his daggers winging towards me, cutting through the air, not caring who they hit. I can see some of his nobles and mercenaries up in the stands, joining in the fight.

I use my net to catch his daggers as they close in on me, but he is not trying to toy with me, not trying to play up to the crowd for once. His daggers are simply coming to try to kill me, and it takes every scrap of reflexes I can borrow from the birds to avoid them.

Even as I do so, I see Bella's closing in on him, using the chaos of the fight on the arena floor to try to get to him without being spotted. Vex represents everything she hates, so it's hardly a surprise that she's trying to kill him now. She lunges forward with a shield of air held up above her to fend off any incoming blows.

Some instinct saves Vex. He twists aside at the last moment, taking a wound to the

side but not falling. The knives that were coming for me now circle back. I try to catch one from the air but compared to the swarm of the rest of them it's nothing.

Bella fends off the knives with her shield of air for a few moments as she attacks with relentless fury. She forces Vex onto the back foot, making him give ground step by step as she strikes at him with the kind of anger and aggression that it's hard to stop. For those seconds it looks as though she might cut Vex down, then leap up into the stands to join in the general fight alongside the common people, urging them to slaughter any nobles who get in their way.

Then one of Vex's knives gets through, slashing across her side. It's enough to break her concentration, if only for a moment. That's enough. More of the knives come for her, plunging into her from every angle as if Bella is a pincushion.

I hear her cry out in pain, collapsing to the sand as the life drains from her. I react on instinct, lifting my spear and throwing it, even as Vex turns back towards me, trying to bring his knives to bear once more. I throw it with all the force my arm can muster, and it slams into his chest, transfixing him, leaving him standing there staring at it. He topples forward and the spear stops him from falling, embedding itself in the ground so that Vex is held up by it like a scarecrow.

I draw my curved knife, all too aware, as I use my net to tangle an incoming below that I've just thrown away my best weapon. Around me, I see other gladiators dying. Rowan is hemmed in by guards, defending himself as best he can. People are falling from the stands. Violence is everywhere.

We are exacting a heavy toll for our lives but the guards keep coming. Even with their numbers thinned by the violence of the night before, there are still far more of them than of us. The truth is that we are losing, and we cannot afford to lose. Given what awaits us if we're captured, it is better to die fighting.

I push that thought aside. This isn't about some heroic last stand. This isn't about my friends dying. I'm here to save the people of Aetheria, and that includes the gladiators out here on the sands. I must find a way to save all of them.

Including Alaric.

The emperor said that he would keep him in the palace. That is where he will be heading now and I have no doubt that once he reaches it he will kill Alaric simply because he can, and to make sure that I never get to him in time. I must not just win this fight, but do it quickly enough that I can get to the palace to stop the emperor from killing the man I love.

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A couple of the guards are moving towards me, and I swing my net to keep them back, but I know this won't be won by simple physical fighting. Thankfully that isn't all that the colosseum is about. We might celebrate martial virtue but there is another side to the colosseum as well. I reach down within myself, for the magic that waits within, And I use that power to reach out to every creature I can feel.

I reach out with tendrils of power, connecting to the beasts that are kept beneath the colosseum, waiting there to kill gladiators and the prisoners for the amusement of the crowd. I can feel the giant snake there, the iron hide, the thunder hooves. Above all, I can feel the shadow cats.

I call to the creatures of the colosseum, and they answer that call. I feel them charging against the bars that hold them back, smashing their way free from their pens, or simply stepping into the shadows in the case of my shadow cat. I called to them and they come to me, roaring up from the depths of the colosseum, hitting the iron gates in a charge that smashes them from their hinges.

I don't just summon the beasts bred for battle either. I call the birds from the sky and the rats that scuttle around the hidden places. I call all of the creatures nearby, my power rolling out in waves. They are the army that Lady Elara thought she would unleash on the city, but now they are mine.

And I am not her, which means I must keep tighter control over these creatures than she would have done. Her plan was simply to unleash them and cause chaos, seizing power as they terrorized the city. I cannot allow that, will not allow that. I hold to them and direct them, focusing them on the soldiers, on our enemies, while forcing them to leave the ordinary people alone.

I feel as though my mind is being dragged in a thousand different directions, and that is the greatest challenge of this not the power required. I have power, I have always had power. The challenge is to control it. I force myself to focus, determined not to let go of any of the animals I am connected with.

I watch the battle through the eyes of birds, using their sight to direct the movements of the beasts. The Ironhide thunders into the colosseum, slamming into a knot of soldiers near Rowan, its great iron horn plunging through one of them who seeks to stab him. Thunder hooves charge in and I stop them near the gladiators, allowing them to climb onto their backs, to give them the advantage of mounts in the fight. I see Cesca balanced on one, swinging down with her sword, lightning crackling along the edge.

The birds give me enough warning to know that a guard is coming up behind me, yet I'm not sure I can react in time. I can't remember which muscles are mine and which belong to the creatures, can't remember how to use my hands to swing my net around to tangle the blade.

The seconds seem to stretch out. My heartbeat slows. I can see the guard's blade advancing at a glacial pace towards my throat.

Am I about to die? Will I be killed because I have given so much of myself to controlling the creatures that I cannot control my own body? The guard steps up next to me, sword raised to finish me.

That is when the shadow cat leaps out of my shadow to pounce on him. Its claws rend his flesh, while its teeth come down on his throat, tearing it away in a spray of blood that I can taste as if it were my mouth doing the killing.

I can sense the attacks of different creatures. I can feel soldiers caught within the coils of my body, feel the play of the muscles as I slowly crush them. I can feel my claws

ripping through my foes. I can taste blood a dozen different ways, hear the screams of the dying.

In it all I see a fresh wave of soldiers heading into the colosseum. Looking at them from above with the birds, I see them as simple shapes, a dart followed by a bigger square. It takes me a moment to pick out the people there. Some are injured, perhaps from fighting elsewhere in the city, perhaps from the violence last night. The ones in front are riding horses, while those behind have heavy armor and are glowing with magic.

The horses are a mistake.

“Rear,”

I whisper to them, and they do it all at once, bucking and kicking, throwing their riders from their backs. Some of the soldiers seem to realize that their mounts are under the control of another, and they kick free of them, struggling to get away. Some of them will lash out with their swords, killing their horses rather than letting them go free as I set them running away.

That is the nature of Aetheria: they destroy what they cannot control.

That is the purpose of the games, too, the reason we were all brought here. We fight because we are given no choice. Many of us die, and I can feel the pulsing power of the stones beneath Aetheria, to which those victims’ powers are sacrificed. They feed the stones in their death.

The few who survive become a part of the broader system of the empire, turned into nobles for it, given a reason not to rise up or fight against it.

The remaining soldiers move forward into the colosseum, and I meet them with a

countercharge of creatures, an entire menagerie descending on them with all the speed and violence they hold. The soldiers struggle to maintain its height formation in the face of such an assault, and that means that gladiators can slip in behind the beasts, magical powers and attacks with weapons blending together in a furious whirlwind of violence.

I see that violence from every viewpoint, every possible angle. I feel it when a blade slides into one of the beasts' bodies, when a spear is driven into the coils of the snake. I feel all their pain, their anger, their fear. I feel that they understand that this is their chance to be free, but I hold on to them tightly to keep them from harming any of the citizens of the city. I will not allow this to be a tidal wave of destruction.

I will not allow it but I'm no longer sure quite who I am. "I"

seems like such a nebulous concept when I am spread out among so many different creatures, able to experience the world in so many different ways. I feel as though I am one giant being composed of many different creatures. I suspect this is what it must feel like to be a god.

Dimly, I'm aware that it isn't a good thing not to be able to find myself. That I should be able to locate a single body to call my own. But how would I even begin to do that? I have too much to do controlling all of the beasts the way I once might have controlled weapons.

"Lyra, you need to focus. You need to come back to yourself."

The words seemed to come to me from a long way away and right next to me all at once. As if someone is shouting in my ear, but those ears are impossible to locate.

I know that voice. A voice that's so familiar, so solid, so safe. A voice that seems to ground me. I follow that voice, focusing on it.

“Lyra, come back!”

Rowan calls, and now I know that it is Rowan. I can feel his hands on my arms, and that sensation reminds me that I have arms. I am not lost, I am standing right in the middle of the battle.

I throw one command out into the rest of the beasts: Only the guards. I hope it will be enough.

Now I pull back to myself, feeling the sensations of my body as I return to having just a single body. I have a measure of control over the creatures but no longer the full immersion that I once had. That is too much to maintain for long. The shadow cat is curled next to me, guarding me. Rowan is standing nearby too, keeping away the last guards nearby.

There are only a few of those left, and even as I watch, they turn to run. The stands are full of rioting people, shouting and fighting, but it seems that our side is the one that is coming out on top here. The beasts I called from the depths of the colosseum have made the crucial difference.

They have not saved everyone, though. Almost half of the dozen gladiators who stood beside me on the sands and refused the emperor's order to fight now lie dead. Bella is among them, so I don't know what that means for her connections within the city. Will they still fight by our side now that she is gone? Will I be able to control them and hold them back from a cascade of retaliation?

I don't know, and I don't have any time to think. We have won here in the colosseum but that is not the same as winning the whole empire. The emperor is still out there, and the last I saw of him he was fleeing, heading back in the direction of his imperial palace.

That means he's heading in the direction of Alaric. I cannot allow him to get to Alaric first. If that happens, even if we win the fight, I will lose the one thing that matters more than anything.

“The emperor is getting away,”

I say to Rowan. “Gather up the rest of the gladiators and anyone else who wants to join us. We need to march on the palace.”

“And will the beasts be coming with us?”

he asks. He sounds something between awestruck and afraid. I nod.

“They will.”

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We pour out into the streets of the city, but not in the tidal wave of destruction that so many others would have wanted. Instead, this is closer to the processions that mark the start of the games. People stand cheering us, waving at us calling our names.

Many of them join our numbers, the ranks of our group swelling into something like an army. These are ordinary people with nothing for weapons but kitchen knives and clubs, but this is Aetheria, and there are sparks of magic even among these people.

We head through the city, and I gain more animals as we go. Stray dogs come to join us from side alleys. Cats leap down from walls. Rats pour from gutters. I am no longer trying to split my mind between all of the creatures. Instead, I maintain a general control, guiding the whole of them, rather than trying to control each one.

When we meet the first cluster of guards, it is not the beasts who fall on them, but the citizens, unleashing an anger that the emperor has held down for far too long. He has sought to use the games to distract them, but that moment is done. They are seeing their moment for change, and they are taking it.

A few look as though they're going to break off to start looting, and I set some of the dogs in front of them, snapping and snarling.

“No looting, no burning!”

I call out. “This is your city, your home. Would you destroy us in the name of taking it back?”

A few of the citizens in the colors of the gangs look at me as if they can't quite

believe what I'm asking of them, but there are enough of the others now that they are forced to go along with it, carried along by the tide of humanity. We are making our way through the wealthier districts now, and the magic that would be given over to illusions normally has instead been drawn back into defensive magic to try to protect the grand houses.

How many nobles are there walking along with us? I have no way of telling when there are so many people, and when I must keep my attention on the creatures I am controlling. One slip and those creatures will burst free of my control and do what they wish. Most I suspect will run, but even then, it will not go well for anyone who gets in their way. Others, the great predators, the monsters, will fall upon the people of the city and kill as many as they can.

I hold them in check, even as I hurry forward with the determination to get to Alaric and free him. We flow towards the palace in the great river of flesh, moving through the noble quarter, the streets of which seem empty, as if the residents are too frightened to come out and be a part of what we are doing. I don't want them to be afraid, so I call out to the noble houses.

“Come out! Join us! The empire hurts you as much as anyone else! It demands that you give up your sons and daughters for glory and honor in the colosseum. It demands that you give them to its armies. And for what? So that the emperor can expand his power even more? Join us! Show us that you are with the people of Aetheria.”

A few of the nobles open their doors, stumbling out into the streets with fearful looks as if expecting that this is all some kind of trap and that they will be cut down even now. More stay hidden, and there is no time to try to persuade them. We must get to the palace.

“We have time,”

Rowan says. "The emperor will not kill Alaric immediately. He will seek to use him as a hostage. A bargaining chip. Have you thought about what you'll do if he does?"

I know what he's asking. Can I risk Alaric's life for the good of everyone in the city? The answer is that I don't know. I can only go there and hope that I'm able to save him and bring the emperor down.

We keep moving through the city streets, and now I have the sense of being watched. Watched in a way I know only too well, through the eyes of animals. There are beast whisperers nearby.

Even as I think it, some run from the shadows, coming at our force.

"Hold!"

I call out to both them and my side. "Hold all of you. We are not enemies."

"You became our enemy the moment you betrayed us to the noble faction and to the emperor."

Lady Elara steps from the shadows after the others. Her dress is torn, her features marred by a bruise. She no longer looks as perfect as she once did. I'm more concerned with the hatred that fills her eyes.

"You were going to destroy the city," I say.

"I was going to take the revenge that our kind are owed!"

she snarls back. "Were we meant to simply walk up and ask the emperor to step down? Were we meant to forget the things that the citizens of this place have done to us over the years?"

“There can still be a place for you in the open in Aetheria,”

I say. “We can stop the persecution of the beast whisperers, but if you want to put an end to the hatred, then setting animals on everyone in the city is not the way to do it.”

“It is the only way,”

Lady Elara snaps. “This is the only way to get justice for our kind. The only way to ensure we're feared enough that no one will harm us again. We will take power, and you have given me the means.”

I know what she means: the parade of animals moving along with us. She wants to take control of them.

“It doesn't have to be like this,”

I say. “You could still join us.”

“Do you think you're in charge here?”

Lady Elara demands. “You were never anything more than a tool to be used, too afraid of your own power to be everything you could be. I will take your creatures, I will set them loose, and then we will rebuild in the ashes of what survives when they are done.”

I feel her mind reaching out for mine, her power struggling to take over what I have claimed. I have more power than her, but she has precision and ruthlessness on her side. In an instant we are fighting over control of the beasts around me, and she has the advantage because she is fighting just to break all chains on them and fill them with fury. Containing them is a far harder task.

“You can't beat me,”

Lady Elara says. “You're too weak.”

“Let me show you how strong I am,” I say.

I take in aspects of the beasts around me, reaching out with my powers to borrow from them, taking sight and strength speed and violence. I take those things, and I push them into Lady Elara. It wouldn't work if she wasn't already trying to steal from me, if she weren't trying to take control of the very same beasts. I force her into the position I was in back in the colosseum, looking through every eye at once, trying to control every animal.

I hear her scream in a bestial roar as her body starts to twist. Her fingers become claws, her eyes become slanted like a cat's. Her skin sprouts patches of fur and scales, feathers and thick hide. I can hold all this without it destroying me, but she cannot. Her body tries to be a hundred different shapes at once as she forgets the being she was. She twists into a chimera, and snarling at me she lunges forward.

Rowan is there then, his shield raised the ground around him rising to support him then absorbs the weight of her charge. He thrusts once with his sword, straight through Lady Elara's heart. She gasps, still trying to get to me, and then the twisted thing she has become collapses to the cobbles of the street.

Around me, the beast whisperers look uncertain what to do next. I look from one to the next of them, even as I reassert my control over the creatures under my command.

“I will not give you vengeance,”

I say. “But I will give you freedom. You could fight us, but you'll lose. Or you could fight the emperor, and maybe we all win.”

I see them hesitating, and I do not wait for them to make up their minds. I have no time. The palace still awaits us, so I head towards it with all the beasts of Aetheria by my side.

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The gates of the palace are closed against us, soldiers building barricades within the grounds, raising magical defenses, using the powers they would normally use for gardening to build defensive walls. It looks different to its usual grandeur, but the purple and gold of the imperial symbols still fly over it. The emperor is here. This is where he has chosen to make his stand.

“How do we do this?”

Rowan asks.

I shake my head. I have no training in siege warfare or the finer points of storming a palace. All I know are the things I want to achieve here: I want to bring an end to the emperor's reign, and I want to make sure that Alaric is safe.

“If this takes too long, Alaric will die,”

I say. “I know all of you want to take the palace, and you will have the beasts by your sides if you want them, but this place is not my priority. He is.”

I did all of this to try to find a way of ending this where Alaric would survive. I want the empire to change, I want the emperor to fall, but not at the expense of Alaric's life. Never that.

To my surprise, Rowan nods. “People matter. I know how much he matters to you. So I'll help you get him back. We will go in with a small group while the rest storm the gates.”

There is no time for a plan more complicated than that. I just have to hope it will be enough. A small group of the gladiators gathers around me, the few who survived the colosseum floor, plus a couple more. It seems like pitifully few, but hopefully we will not have to take on the might of the emperor's soldiers.

Everyone else charges at the gates. It is a sight to behold, and I watch some of it through the eyes of a watching crowd. It is like a wave battering against the walls, only this wave is formed from people who have magic, because this is Aetheria. In just seconds the air is filled with bursts of magic, with fire and lightning mixing, with people moving in strange ways that have nothing to do with gravity, the gates are covered in frost, then flame, then lightning.

And the beasts pour over all of it. The emperor's remaining soldiers move to engage the onrushing hoard. Many will have been slain last night, many more have been killed in the colosseum, I suspect that many have simply fled, realizing the way things are going. Or perhaps they are trying to keep order elsewhere in the city. Yet there are still enough here to try to protect the palace, enough that this will not be an easy fight.

I know that we will only have a brief window to save Alaric, so I rush around the side of the palace with Rowan and the others. Of course the walls prevent entry but Rowan stands in front of them and I can see him straining as he seeks to use his power to the maximum effect. Normally his control over earth and stone is limited, but I have seen him keep stones off him, seen him raise up the earth to grab people's feet. Now he works on the granular level, eroding the mortar between the stones, letting it crumble little by little so that it is not long before he can push the stones over, leaving a hole in the wall big enough for all of us to get through.

We are in the imperial gardens, moving quickly and quietly now. The strange beasts that the emperor keeps in his menagerie ignore us. One of the purple and gold butterflies bigger than my head flits past, apparently unconcerned by the violence

taking place on the other side of the palace. I can hear the shouts and the screams from that side. I can see the violence from above through the eyes of one of the birds watching. The soldiers are putting up as much resistance as they can, so that the space before the palace is starting to fill with bodies.

We are meeting no resistance. It seems that the soldiers have put all their efforts into stopping the breach of the walls. Even so our small group moves quietly, trying to keep low and out of sight. One of our number has a minor talent for manipulating plants, so they have them provide us with cover as we move, the leaves flowing ahead of us to close gaps between rows of hedges.

The emperor's grand receiving room on the fringes of his garden is not far ahead. It is shielded behind the usual magic that keeps out anyone trying to enter from the gardens. I'm not sure how we're meant to get through it, but some of the others look confident.

We need to get through it, because that is where the emperor is. He is standing there with Lord Darius, Selene Ravenscroft, and a couple of guards. We approach, and now all of the gladiators with me spread out around the shield, using whatever magic they possess against it. Rowan shifts the earth beneath it. Cesca runs lightning into it through her sword. Someone makes water cascade down it. The gladiators with me pour everything they have into breaking that shield.

Still, I don't think it will be enough. Then I see Selene Ravenscroft make a gesture, and it seems that cracks appear in the shield, cracks that widen and then split apart, shattering the magic into thousands of fragments which dissipate in the air. I had not thought that she would go this far to help us. She helped me with my dampener, but I thought that was simply out of her sense of justice. To do this... she is actively betraying Emperor Tiberius.

“Traitor!”

the emperor roars, but he does not have time to do more than that as we charge forward.

Lord Darius leaps to his defense, now it seems he's concentrating his power much more than he was in the colosseum. One of our number screams, his flesh blackening as fire burns it from the inside. The full might of the master of the games is incredible to behold, especially when he combines it with a series of attacks with two swords that move with lightning speed. I engage him, swinging my net, while Rowan comes in from the far side.

Even outnumbered as he is, even though he is long past his fighting prime, Lord Darius moves with a speed and power that means he keeps up with us, at least for now. I know however that sheer numbers will eventually bring him down.

The emperor seems to know the same thing. He is backing towards the door as if looking for a place to escape to. I disengage from Lord Darius, starting towards him, half expecting him to simply run.

But he doesn't. It seems that the emperor was not looking for a way to escape but simply enough space to concentrate. Around me I feel time slowing to a crawl, my net seeming to creep across the space between us. Then time stops for me, and I am paralyzed in the middle of my attack.

So is everyone else in the room, except Lord Darius. We are frozen like statues by the emperor's power, but it is more than just us. Through the eyes of a bird, I see that out in front of the palace, the citizens the beasts and the gladiators have come to a halt, standing frozen in place by the emperor's power.

Somehow, he has managed to be selective about it. Those who stand against his forces are frozen in time, cut off between one second and the next, while his soldiers are free to keep moving. Free to kill their helpless opponents. I see the soldiers

sauntering among them, thrusting blades through hearts or cutting throats. They are taking their time, as if knowing that there is no threat now. This is not a battle but a series of executions.

“Did you think it would be so easy here?” The emperor demands. I can see the concentration on his face. “Here right above the stones that give the city its power? There's a reason my ancestors built their palace here.”

There is a note of strain in his expression. It's obvious that this is on the limits of what he can do. How long can he maintain something like this? How long does he need to maintain it when he is free to kill all of us?

"You thought you could beat me in my own palace?" he demands. "You thought that a mere animal like you could ever stand against me? Well, you're going to pay for that. But not before someone else pays first.”

He steps out of the room for a moment, dragging a figure back with him. He has to drag him not because of any resistance, but because he is as frozen as anyone else, his feet locked in position, so that the emperor must push him in front of me, the way he might adjust the positioning of a statue until it was in the perfect spot.

He manhandles Alaric's frozen form into place before me, and he smiles as he draws a golden dagger.

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My body might be frozen in time, but my heart still feels as though it's pounding in my chest.

“You made a mistake with me,”

he says. “You showed me what you care about. The moment you did that, you gave yourself to me. You gave me power over you. The power to take from you the one thing you love.”

He moves to Alaric, cutting slowly down his arm as if to make a point. Caught in time as he is, the blood does not flow beyond a single line. Alaric cannot cry out in pain, cannot give any sign of the way in which the emperor has hurt him, but still I feel the wound as if it is my own.

I want to beg him not to do this. I want to tell him that Alaric has nothing to do with this, that he knew nothing about it. But even if my mouth were not frozen shut by the emperor's power, I'm not sure it would make any difference to him. At this point, he has won. The rebellious factions within his empires have taken their best shot at him, and the truth is that we have failed. Between his manipulations and his personal power, he has destroyed all of us.

“I suppose I should thank you, Lyra,”

he says. “You have proven very useful over the last few days. Thanks to your efforts we were able to break the spectral covenant, and capture several nobles who were plotting against me. They will die in due course. And now this. You have brought my enemies to me. The festering boil of rebellion is finally to be lanced.”

He says it a calm almost companionable tone, as if I were some loyal servant, but I have seen the emperor's madness, his evil before. He is more than capable of talking calmly while killing. Of lashing out simply because he can.

He moves to me, and in one sense I'm grateful, because at least it means he's taken his attention away from Alaric, for the moment at least.

“I wonder if this is what I saw in my visions,”

he says. “That you would try to kill me and end up saving the city by bringing all of its malcontents to where I can hold them in place for my guards to kill. I wonder how many they have slain now.”

I can see the guards are still moving among the frozen people. They are laughing as they kill them. If they show mercy here and there, it is only because it is someone they have decided they want to toy with further later.

“You have been so powerful,”

the emperor says. “And yet through it all you've always been so weak, as well. So held back by your need to help others, by whatever love you think you feel, by the desire to do the 'right thing.' And now it's cost you everything.”

He cuts me now in a single line of agonizing pain along my chest. He lifts the knife when he's done, tasting the blood.

“Somehow I feel as though your blood should taste different, beast whisperer.”

I hope that his power will slip soon. I can see the effort of holding us all in place on his face. He's sweating slightly with the strain of maintaining his power.

He looks back to Alaric. “I don't understand why you of all people would be interested in someone like her. Why you would willingly give up your life to save her. She's pretty enough but, worth dying for?”

He returns to me, and now his lips press into mine, still tasting of blood. I want to recoil from him, to pull back, to hit him for forcing this kiss on me, but of course that's the point: I cannot. This is purely about the power he has over me and the others here.

“No, I don't see it,”

he says. He goes back to stand behind Alaric. “That's at least you got to see me do that before you die.”

He lifts the knife, now raising it to Alaric's throat. Through the eyes of the birds, I can see the soldiers are still killing outside. And I'm helpless to stop all of it. Wait... I'm seen through the eyes of the birds. Birds that are moving and wheeling above it all. The emperor has stopped time for some of the beasts, all of the ones that are obviously dangerous, but not for every creature. Maybe he doesn't have the power to do that much.

A desperate last ditch idea comes to me, one that seems doomed to failure but I don't have any other options. I reach out with my mind because my power is not contained even if I am. I connect to a single bird out in the garden, and I bring it towards the receiving room.

“I'm sure if Lyra could speak, she would have some poignant last words for you,”

Emperor Tiberius says to Alaric. “Something about how much she loves you, how she would give her life for you. The usual nonsense. Sadly she can't say anything so you're going to have to die without hearing it.”

I push the bird to fly faster, forcing it to its limits. My consciousness is bound up with it as I lend it my strength, the way I have borrowed strength from animals before. It flies faster and faster. Through its eyes I can see the emperor raising his knife for the killing blow...

As the bird, I fly straight into him, slamming into his skull with sickening force. I am thrown into my body as the bird's neck breaks, and the emperor reels back, stumbling.

More importantly, he loses the concentration he needs to keep his grip on time. Alaric moves in a flash, grabbing the emperor's knife arm and turning it back towards him, the point of the dagger set to the emperor's heart. I can see the emperor trying to concentrate, trying to freeze time again, but he's an instant too slow as Alaric pulls him in close, driving the point of the dagger deep into the emperor's chest.

At the same time, I see the rebels in front of the palace return to movement, right at the moment when their attackers thought they had them at their mercy. The soldiers are caught utterly off guard, poised on the verge of executing their victims. The gladiators, the common folk, the beasts, all surge into them, cutting them down now in a wave of renewed violence that sends them running, trying to escape. I send the beasts after them because I don't want to risk any more human lives chasing them away.

“No!”

Lord Darius cries out, charging at us with his swords, but the other gladiators who were frozen are able to move now, and they leap at him together. He brings one down with a thrust but another grabs his left arm, while Rowan uses his shield to block a blow from the right hand blade.

“Surrender, Darius,”

Rowan says. “Your emperor is dead.”

“And you will follow him traitors!”

Lord Darius says. He keeps fighting, but now he has no time to use his powers, and there are too many opponents. He goes down fighting under a pile of them, all of them stabbing him retribution for the cruelty of their training, the harshness of the regime he oversaw at Ironhold. I do not know who strikes the killing blow, but in just seconds they are all stepping away from him and he is staring glassily at the ceiling.

The gladiators turn their attention to Selene Ravenscroft, who is standing by the side of the room with a grave expression of pity on her face. They start to advance on her, but I step into their path.

“No, enough. The arch magistrate helped us. She's the one who brought the barrier down. And... the killing has to stop somewhere.”

“You are wise,”

Selene says. She moves to me and touches my wrist. My dampener falls away completely.

“You're just going to let her go?”

Alaric says. “She's one of them. She has done so much...”

“At the emperor's command,”

Selene says. She steps out into the garden. Light starts to swirl around her. Alaric looks as though he might rush at her, but I catch his arm.

“Let her go,”

I say, as the arch magistrate steps into those swirling lights and vanishes. I pull Alaric to me, kissing him deeply. “We have better things to do.”

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Sadly, those things don't involve simply falling into bed with one another for a couple of weeks. There is too much to do in the city for that. Too much to organize, and it seems that everyone is talking to me now to organize it. I'm the one who must tell people to begin the clean up, who must arrange for the squads of gladiators and other folk who keep the peace in the days that follow, and who fight against the few pockets of those loyal to the emperor that remain.

At least, I do that in the day. At night... at night, I sleep wrapped in Alaric's arms within the palace, grateful for something I thought would never happen again.

A knock comes at the door.

“Wake up, you two!”

It's Rowan's voice. Thankfully he has more sense than to open the door. “We're almost ready for the meeting of the council.”

I sigh, even though this was my idea. It seemed to be the only way of bringing people together in the city, finding a new way of ruling that wasn't dependent on emperors.

“Do we have to go?”

Alaric asks. “The council will be filled with so many common people, and I'd rather spend my time here.”

It seems that even nearly dying hasn't quite cured him of his arrogance. It's just as well I find it one of his more endearing qualities.

“Do I need to remind you that I'm common?”

I point out.

He pulls me into a kiss. “You are anything but common.”

I pull back from him and dress in a pale gown edged with silver, a long way from the training gear of Ironhold or the armor needed for the colosseum. The iron collar is gone from around my neck as well. As for the brand on my left shoulder... that is burned into a perfect black circle, the interior filled in completely, thanks to Lord Darius's power. It marks me, as it marks all of those few who fought in the colosseum in that last bout, showing the role we played, and the price some of us paid.

“Come on,”

I say. “Your mother will be there.”

That at least gets him out of bed and dressed in his noble finery. We head through the palace, making our way towards a large meeting room within it. Others are already gathering within it, representatives of the different factions within the city: the different trades, the nobles, the beast whisperers, even the gangs. I can see Rowan standing there, dressed in simple but well-made clothes. Two auburn-haired young women stand near him, presumably his sisters. As with me, none of them wear their slave collars anymore.

I step in front of the rest of them. I should be nervous, talking in front of so many people, but I have rallied the crowd in the colosseum to the cause of revolt. I have talked down the beast whisperers. I have faced up to foes more deadly than I could have imagined when I was a little girl. I've done all of that. Compared to that, what is one council meeting?

“My friends,”

I say. “Thank you for coming here, to this council. We have much to discuss.”

For a moment it seems as if all of them are talking at once, trying to put over different points. I hold up my hands for silence.

“Each of you will get a turn to speak,”

I say. “For now, we must discuss the situation in the city.”

I start by turning to the beast whisperer representative. She is a woman whose voice I know. I get the feeling she was one of those who helped test me when I sought to become one of their number.

“What has happened to the beasts?” I ask.

“They have been driven from the city,”

she says. “The dangerous ones have been accompanied far away before being released. Some of the others have been taken to places that will suit them.”

“When it comes to the dangerous ones, we should keep watch,”

I say. “If beast whisperers show that they use their powers to guide dangerous creatures away from people, it will go a long way to show the citizens that we are not a threat to them.”

And I have made it clear to them that we are not a threat to the citizens. Most seem to be accepting it for now. I turn to a representative of the gangs. As distasteful as it is to deal with them, it's better to include them than be stuck fighting against them as a

whole.

“Are things more peaceful in the slums?”

I ask. “Is food getting to the people who need it?”

“We're doing our part,”

their representative says. He will not show his face even here, as if afraid of being identified later.

“Make sure you do,” I say.

The nobles are next, with Alaric's mother speaking up on their behalf. “The noble houses are still worried that you plan to seize everything they own.”

“Aren't we?”

the gang leader says, and it seems only half in jest.

“Not everything,”

I say. “But the days of them owning people are at an end.”

That is one thing that I will not budge on. I have seen what it is to be owned, and my captivity was not as bad as some others'. I had the prospect of freedom ahead of me, and I was valued for my fighting skills.

“This will damage the economy!”

One of the merchants says. “The slave markets are a source of wealth for”

“If your wealth is built on the misery of others,”

I say, “Then maybe you do not deserve to be wealthy. But I'm sure you'll find another way to make money. For now, how are the grain shipments?”

“They are on their way, as promised,”

the merchant says.

On and on it goes. There are so many issues. In spite of my efforts to limit the damage, there are portions of the city that must be rebuilt. There are decisions to be made about what to do with the gladiators who suddenly find themselves free and with nothing to do. There are those who want to reopen the colosseum. That is another point on which I've been firm. Maybe in future they will open it in some less deadly form, but for now it sits empty and closed.

“There is another matter,”

one of the nobles says, a man I do not know. “When is your coronation going to be?”

That catches me by surprise. “What coronation?”

“There is no need to be coy. You have seized the city and killed the emperor. You are empress in all but name. So when are you going to make it official?”

I shake my head. I want to say that I have not been acting like an empress, but even in this council I have been making the decisions. It's all too easy to see how I could become the ruler of all Aetheria. I can almost imagine it, living here in the palace with Alaric as my consort, having servants to run to meet my every need. With my power over beasts, the city would be safe because any threat could be dealt with by those creatures, and anyone trying to plot against me would not know whether a rat in

the corner was listening in to their conversation...

I can imagine all of it, which is why I cannot do it.

"I am not going to be crowned,"

I say. "I am not going to rule here."

"You say that,"

the nobleman says, "but you're already giving us commands. Freeing the slaves? Shutting the colosseum? The priests are declaring it heresy!"

"I have done what I needed to do for the good of this city and its people,"

I say. "I will not apologize for setting free people you have treated like chattel. I will not apologize for stopping something that has cost the lives of people around the empire for generations. Those things are non-negotiable. Think of them as the conditions of surrender for the city, if you like. But beyond that? I called you here not to crown me your empress, but to form a council that will rule this city. Maybe if you all work together, there's a chance you'll work in the interests of all the people of the empire."

"We still need a leader,"

Lillian Blackthorn says. "If not empress, then maybe you could be the leader of the council?"

It's a tempting offer. In some ways, it's more tempting than the possibility of becoming empress. I have seen the evils that an emperor does, but it's easier to convince myself that I could do good as the leader of the council. But I know that

doesn't work either. The temptation would always be there to simply rule, to force my path on the empire. Aetheria needs a fresh start. And in truth, I don't want to. I can think of other things I would much rather do with my life than spend it arguing in council chambers.

“I cannot lead the council,”

I say. “In time, I'm sure you'll find ways to choose your own leaders, but for now I would like to recommend Rowan.”

“But he isn't even noble,”

the nobleman says.

“Nor am I,”

I point out. “And in any case, that's kind of the point. This council can't just be for the nobles, or for the merchants, or for the beast whisperers. It can't be for any one faction. Rowan did as much to bring down the emperor as any of us, and I know he will be a steady influence on the city.”

He will also be an influence who won't give ground on the issues that matter. He will protect the ordinary people of the empire and won't allow the nobles to grab control for one of their own. He will do all that, but he won't become a tyrant in his own right. He doesn't have that in him.

“All those in favor of Rowan as council leader?”

Lillian says, obviously trying to push it through before anyone else can object.

Hands go up around the room, some quickly, some with reluctance. Many of those

there seem to realize that, even if Rowan is not the person they would have chosen, at least there is no chance he is going to side with the factions they hate the most.

I smile and turn, walking from the council chamber. Rowan follows me, catching hold of my arm and turning me back to him.

“You can't just make me the council leader,” he says.

“I'm fairly sure I just did,”

I reply. “Besides, I can't think of anyone better. You know what it's like to be brought to the city as a slave, to be a gladiator, but you also know about the ways nobles work. People seem to trust you, and you will be able to balance the factions within the city.”

“And if I can't?”

Rowan asks. “If it all falls apart and another emperor rises?”

“Then every beast of the city will rise against him,”

I promise. “I'm leaving, but I won't be going so far I can't hear news of Aetheria. It's the greatest city in the world after all.”

“Where are you going?”

Rowan asks. “If you're not going to run things here, what are you going to do?”

I smile as I look back to where Alaric is sauntering from the council chamber. I had thought he'd be upset about me turning down the role of empress. Instead, he looks pleased.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

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“Are you bothered that you never got the chance to be the consort to the Empress of Aetheria?”

I ask Alaric as we walk along the coast. The shadow cat who has bonded with me pads along a little way from us, slinking from shadow to shadow, occasionally trying to pounce on a gull that is not wary enough about it.

“Not as much as I would have thought,”

Alaric says. “Obviously, there would have been considerable status in the role, honor, glory, and so on.”

“And you're all about those,” I say.

He smiles, putting an arm around me. “Not all. I think I found at least one thing that matters more.”

“And what would that be?”

I ask, teasing him.

Of course, the problem with teasing Alaric is that he's better at it.

“You know, I forgot. I'm sure it will come back to me.”

I punch his shoulder, and he draws me into a kiss.

“Oh, yes,”

he breathes against my lips. “That.”

We are a long way from Aetheria now. We have walked for days, sticking to the coast. We have not been bothered by bandits, at least not after the first attempt. I lean on a spear and a pair of swords at his waist. Combined with the shadow cat, it seems to be enough of a deterrent. We have stopped wherever we can find shelter.

Now we are nearing our destination.

“How do you feel about being outside the city?”

I ask. “I know you didn't want to run away to a sleepy little seaside village.”

“I said that to try to save you,”

Alaric replies. “And I'm sorry.”

“You don't need to be,”

I reply. “But are you going to be alright going to my home? I can barely imagine you in a poor fishing village. There isn't a single bathhouse.”

“Then how do you bathe?”

Alaric asks.

“In the rockpools.”

“I'm sure I can get used to it. And this sea air isn't... entirely intolerable.”

Sometimes I wonder why I put up with him.

Then I look at him, and love bursts through my heart all over again.

It isn't just that he's the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

It's that somewhere under that veneer of arrogance is someone who truly cares, not just about me but about the world around him.

Someone who pretends only to care about glory and honor, but who was happy to risk his life for me, to kill an emperor... oh, and to turn cartwheels for small children in the middle of processions.

Someone like Vex, who truly did only care for his own position, would not have done any of those things.

We round a bend and Seaside comes into view, the sunlight behind it.

It seems so small now that I have been to the most important city in the world.

It is tiny, amid dot on the edge between land and waves.

Yet my heart leaps at the sight of it, because this is home.

My mother is there somewhere, and all the people I knew growing up.

I do not know how long Alaric and I will stay.

I want to show him off to my mother, introduce him to all my friends.

I think we will stay a while, but I also know that this place is too small for Alaric.

For his ego, if nothing else.

Possibly it is too small for me now too.

Ultimately we will need to wander again, seeing what else the world contains.

For now, though, it is enough that it contains Alaric, and that he is by my side.