



Ironhold, Trial Three

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Reeling from the previous seasons betrayal, Lyra Thornwind struggles with trust issues but must form new alliances to survive. Her growing fame brings new dangers as Emperor Tiberius takes notice of her. Lyra is forced to compete in the Champions Trial, a grueling series of challenges against the most fearsome beasts and seasoned gladiators. Her relationships with both Alaric and Rowan intensify, creating a complex love triangle, even while she secretly trains with Lady Elara, pushing the limits of her beast communion abilities. The season ends with Lyra making a moral choice between saving lives, or a chance at victory in the arena.

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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“Can someone explain to me why the unrest has not been brought under control?” Tiberius bellowed to his advisors, his anger rippling out around the room.

Emperor Tiberius VI of the Aetherian Empire was not happy. He so rarely was these days in his councils of advisors. He stood at the head of the table, because he preferred to stand rather than sit in the carved ivory throne that had belonged to his ancestors. He passed in front of the table, which showed a model of the city, maps of the wider empire set out around it almost as an afterthought.

Aetheria was the center of the world; everything else was secondary. A dozen or more of his advisors were seated around it. Most of them looked nervous. They were right to.

“We quell each piece as it arises, but the issue is that so many people are discontented. Some of them hate you, Tiberius.”

If anyone other than the arch magistrate, Selene Ravencroft, had said that, Tiberius might have lashed out without thinking. But he knew to be careful with her. She was an unassuming-looking woman in her thirties with strange white hair, but her eyes were filled with power.

Like Tiberius' own. He was older than Selene by a few years, into his forties now, his dark hair receding slightly, his frame lean and tall. He wore the purple toga of the emperors, where the others had to make do with whatever finery they could manage. Somehow, all their gold and embroidery wasn't nearly as impressive as the purple. It didn't embody the same power over the world.

Not that Tiberius lacked gold. A golden circle of laurel leaves sat atop his brow, proclaiming his status as the ruler of the empire. On days like this, it felt more like a chore than an honor.

“ Why are they discontented?” Tiberius demanded. “They have broken windows, burned houses, shouted for my death! Why?”

He gestured to the map. “They live in the greatest city in the world. They have wonders in their lives thanks to magic that others can only dream of. Most of them have minor magics of their own. They live at the heart of the empire. And yet they complain?”

"They do more than complain," Lord Darius said. He was a former gladiator, now Tiberius' right-hand man when it came to the Colosseum at the heart of the city. He and Selene organized the games between them. He also handled whatever Tiberius needed in Ironhold, the great fortress that trained the gladiators. "Some of them have been attacking guards."

“Then have those ones impaled, or thrown to the beasts in the arena,” Tiberius said. Did he have to think of everything? His anger was only rising.

"And yet the more you kill, the more there are," Lady Elara said. She was Tiberius' age, with dark hair and features that had retained their beauty despite the years. She wore a gown of white, trimmed with gold.

“You would suggest something else?” Tiberius demanded.

"The more you try to crush a man, the more he rises up," Elara said. "And violence doesn't take away problems like hunger. The grain ships have been late. Aetheria has magic and steel, but food matters more than either."

“You’re just presenting me with more problems!” Tiberius snapped. “Release grain from our stores. That will help pacify them.”

“The emperor is wise,” Lady Elara said. “There has also been some discontent over the issue of beast whisperers.”

“Why?” Flavius, the master of the guards, asked. “Because you have been spreading rumors about them?”

“My lord Flavius, I am not one to spread unfounded rumors,” Lady Elara insisted.

"No," Lord Darius said. "You prefer your parties and your illusions. Endless things that don't add to the city. And it's not hard to see why you're so interested in beast whisperers, given that you're consorting with one. She's meant to be a gladiator, Elara, not your plaything."

Tiberius knew who they were talking about. How could he not when he'd seen her fighting in the colosseum?

“I still don't see why you don't just have the gladiator Lyra killed,” Flavius said.

"Because that is not how the Colosseum works ," Tiberius said. “It will be viewed as an offence to the gods, and even I will not risk their wrath.”

The truth was more complicated than that. Everyone had heard about Tiberius' prophecy that a beast whisperer would lead to his fall. Yet that was not exactly what he'd seen. It wasn't quite how his power worked.

Magic was so common in Aetheria that it was easy to believe it was understood, yet that was far from the case. Magic flowed outwards from the stone deep beneath the city. It was fed by violence and power. It meant that many of the citizens were born

with minor magical talents, and a few had considerable power.

Tiberius was one of the strongest, born to a line noted for their unique gifts. His talent was the controlling time: chronomancy. He got flashes of the future, glimpses of the weave of possibilities. He had seen that there were threats to the empire, but also opportunities for it to build its strength still further. He knew that a beast whisperer would be the catalyst for all of it.

For a long time, he had focused on the danger to himself. He had made sure that beast whisperers were persecuted, that they would never be in positions to be a threat to him. But now there was the gladiator, Lyra, brought to the city from some small town on the coast.

She should have died. The policy when it came to beast whisperers in the arena was clear. They were thrown in against the most difficult challenges, and they were killed quickly for the entertainment of the crowd. Yet Lyra had survived two seasons of games on the holy days. She had shown her strength.

Did that make her dangerous or interesting? Did it mean she was something to be destroyed or something that might be beneficial to the empire? In this, even Tiberius couldn't see for sure.

He had to rely on his instincts, where some of his ancestors might have been able to see perfectly. They had built their empire by picking through the possibilities, judging what would be best for their family, and for the city. Not that there had been any real difference in those days. Tiberius couldn't see the end of every thread. He had to judge the meaning for himself, and he wasn't quite sure how to judge Lyra Thornwind.

“It is a pity it is not close to the holy days,” Lord Darius said. “The mood of the city always picks up when there are games.”

Of course it did. That was a part of why Tiberius' ancestors had founded the games. They wanted to give the people a release that was not violence on the streets. And in the colosseum, they managed to achieve other aims as well. They could sort the wheat from the chaff of those with magical abilities. They created a space for nobles to play out their petty politics. Indeed they had become primarily a place of money and political power, of decadence and shifting alliances.

But that could be good, too. The betting filled Tiberius' coffers, since he took a portion of each transaction. And the blood of the fallen could feed the stones, their magic pouring back into them.

It was a combination that served the city well, and maybe it could here, too.

"There are other games than just the regular ones on holy days," Tiberius pointed out.

Lord Darius looked confused for a moment, then understanding seemed to dawn on him.

"You're talking about the Champions Trials?"

Tiberius nodded. "They used to have them in the old days, didn't they? A select group of champions. Specially constructed situations within the arena. A test beyond the normal."

"Such a thing has not been done in a long time," Selene Ravenscroft pointed out. No doubt she knew exactly how long. She kept records of most things. She thought that knowledge was power, when Tiberius knew that power came from magic and steel.

"But maybe the time has come to revive it," Tiberius said. "An additional set of games to catch the mood of the people and distract them until the grain ships can arrive."

It would do more than that, though. It would allow Tiberius to truly test the strongest among the gladiators. To see which of them was worthy, which of them might be a useful ally, and perhaps whether any of them would be a problem in future. It would allow him to see whether the shapes of the future that his powers had shown him were correct.

Yes, the more he thought about this, the better he decided the idea was.

“See to it, Darius,” Tiberius said. “Start to arrange the Champions Trials. The people will love it, and I will get to see more of these gladiators. Oh, and Darius?”

“Yes my emperor?” Darius said.

“Make sure that this beast whisperer, Lyra, is one of those chosen for it.”

“You want her given that kind of attention?” Lady Elara asked.

“I want her tested to the very limit,” Tiberius said. “Perhaps she will die. Perhaps the challenges will crush her.”

“And if they do not?” Lord Darius asked.

“Then that would make her very interesting to me indeed.”

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“I wish you didn’t have to go,” Alaric says, as I slip smoothly from his bed and dress again, ready to head down and train with the other gladiators. I tie back the gold of my hair, slipping on my halter top, brief skirt and sandals. The kind of basic training gear given to all of the gladiators.

“It’s better if I do,” I say.

Alaric and I might be together, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily a good idea for us to be seen to be romantically involved. For one thing, he is a noble gladiator, where as I am a slave, captured by the soldiers of Aetheria. An iron collar around my neck proclaims my status. We might both have a brand on our left shoulders, showing how many seasons we have completed in the colosseum, but our positions are not the same.

“To go train with everyone else,” Alaric says, a hint of jealousy in his tone.

“I need to train, Alaric,” I reply. I hadn’t thought he would have a jealous or possessive note to him, but it seems he does.

We just can’t be seen together.

Alaric’s fellow nobles would probably consider him spending time with me to be fine, but they would laugh at the idea of him having feelings for me. To them, a slave gladiator is something to use and discard. Meanwhile, the other gladiators conscripted into the games would see it as a betrayal for me to be with him.

Not that there aren't plenty of reasons to be with him, and Alaric’s sheer beauty is

only one of them. He is beautiful, because features that fine don't deserve to be called simply handsome. Dark hair frames his face, and storm-tossed dark eyes stare out at me. His body is slender and lean, and currently he seems to be posing as if expecting a sculptor to be along to capture his form at any moment. Alaric lounges with deliberate grace beneath the sheets, the invitation obvious.

But that isn't the reason that it's hard to go. I have seen more of Alaric than just the arrogant, unfeeling facade that he puts out to the world, the occasional burst of jealousy and the deadly skill with a blade. The side of him that laughs at danger, flirts with any beauty he meets and seems untroubled by killing. But I have also seen through that, to the man whose family mostly wants nothing to do with him, and who must meet with his mother in secret. To the man who clearly does care, even if the act he puts on refuses to let him show it.

“I need to go,” I say. “You know that. And you should hurry, too. You can't miss training.”

Even a noble such as Alaric must abide by the rules of Ironhold or face punishment. In the mornings, we work under the eyes of the trainers, lifting rocks, running and striking at wooden posts with weapons. We move in long lines, each of us with our preferred weapons, practicing the basic movements. Such practice has hardened my body, although I will never be as heavily built as some. It has left me lithe and athletic, able to push myself further than I might have thought possible.

I head for the training ground now, making my way through the corridors of Ironhold, the fortress given over to containing and training gladiators. It is a granite walled place, not far from the city, with soldiers walking the tops of the walls, looking down on us to make sure none of us escape. They call it a fortress, but in reality, it is a prison. The only ways out are during the games, or if we are summoned by noble patrons who wish to spend time with us, to be seen with us, or to try to seduce us.

There are already plenty of others gathered by the time I reach the main training ground, a vast sandy circle designed to replicate the conditions of the arena, but set with training gear. Zara is there, with her flame red hair and pale skin, her skill in manipulating water so important to her that she carries vials of it wherever she goes. Like that, she will never be unarmed. Rowan is there too, heavily muscled, his auburn hair falling to his shoulders, covering the silvery scar that crosses his square-jawed features. He looks out at me with an unhappy expression that says he knows exactly where I've been.

He is not the only one. Ravenna is there, lovely as always, wearing silken robes over her gladiatorial gear, her jet-black hair falling to her waist. She smiles in a way that suggests she approves slightly, but I don't care what she thinks now. With her power to whisper in people's minds, I am sure she played a role in what happened to my friend Naia last season in the arena.

Naia betrayed me. I wear a dampener on my left wrist, a leather cuff worked with runes of power, designed to limit the magic I can employ until I show that I am no danger to the citizens of the empire. My talent is with animals, for connecting to them, even controlling them. But I am not fully in control of myself. Indeed, there are those who fear that my power controls me, that I will become little more than a beast myself.

Naia cut that cuff from my wrist in the middle of a bout in the colosseum. A wave of power flowed out into me, like water rushing through a collapsing dam. I almost lost control, almost got myself and others killed. And the time it took for me to regain control meant that a gladiator named Vex was able to kill Naia. I will not forgive Ravenna for that. Not when I know it was her whispers in Naia's ear that controlled her actions.

Vex is here too, golden haired and wearing the colors of his noble house, his face scarred where a shadow cat under my command has clawed him in a past fight

between us. His family has a long history in the games, and he doesn't see why common-born gladiators such as myself should have any part in them. I cannot forgive him either.

We are not the only ones in the training ground, of course. There are plenty of others, even given how many have died in the games. Soldiers bring others to Ironhold all the time. The large gladiator Arctus paces back and forth near Vex, having decided that loyalty to him represents his best chance of an easy way through here. A dark-haired young woman named Cesca is near Ravenna. It seems that Ravenna has already gotten her claws into her, even though Cesca has only been around a single season. A strange, bald, silent gladiator named Vesper paces the edges. I'm told he can speak but mostly doesn't bother, as if the rest of us aren't worth talking to. A woman named Malira is new, sallow skinned, dark haired and a little shorter than me. They say that she is a former pit fighter who made her name fighting on the fringes of the empire before being brought to Aetheria. She looks across to me with silent dislike. I don't even know why.

No one talks to me because we are too busy starting training. We run, we work. It is the same each day because there is no time to simply rest. We all know that when the next set of holy days rolls around, we will all need to fight again. If we fail to prepare enough, we will die, despite the magical powers most of us possess.

Yet, it is not long before Lord Darius Blackthorn steps onto a platform at one end of the training area, his dark eyes scanning over all of us. He is still in shape in spite of being in middle age, with the hardness that comes from being a former gladiator. His control over fire is why each of us here has a brand on our left shoulder, representing the colosseum, along with marks across it showing the number of seasons we have survived. Five seasons, and we are free. Those of us who have been enslaved become noble citizens of Aetheria, and any children we have will count as noble born. For those who are already noble, it is a path to glory and prestige among their peers. A way to find better marriages and alliances, money and power.

That is our incentive, but we also have no choice. As powerful as we are, there are many in Aetheria who have magic, and we cannot take on the whole army.

"Stop and listen, all of you," Lord Darius calls out, his voice rolling around the training area. "I have an announcement."

We come to a halt. In a place like Ironhold, any news matters. Are we about to be faced by a fresh batch of recruits? No, Lord Darius doesn't usually announce that. They just show up, a horn blaring to declare their presence. Something else then? Something about the next set of games? But we have weeks to prepare yet for the coming holy days.

We stand staring at him, waiting for whatever the news is with anticipation. My nerves thrum with it because Lord Darius has yet to announce anything that has been good for me. Perhaps this is going to be some new training regime or some brutal practice fight between us.

"Today, the emperor has declared the revival of an old tradition," Lord Darius says. "The Champions Trials will be held in just a few days. I have been asked to provide some of the best gladiators for it. Those who take part will face challenges in the arena over five rounds that will include shifting battlefields that go beyond the usual fights. This will count as a season for those who survive it."

That catches my attention. Anything that will shorten my time in Ironhold has to be taken seriously. But is there really a chance I will be a part of this? With the emperor want me as a part of it? Everything I've seen so far suggests that he wants me to die, and that he resents my growing fame among the citizens.

"The gladiators for this have already been selected," Lord Darius says. "Step forward, Alaric."

Alaric does so, bowing as if there were an audience watching beyond his fellow gladiators.

“Rowan!”

Rowan moves forward with purpose, standing a little way from Alaric, clearly not wanting to get too close.

Others are called up. Vex is next, then Ravenna. Silent Vesper is there, and Malira. More are called, because over five rounds the assumption must be that many will die.

“Lyra.”

I start as I hear my name. I know I have some fame in the arena, but it still didn't occur to me that I would really be called for this. I step forward to join the others. The ones who have not been chosen look jealous and relieved in equal measure, both wanting the chance to move closer to freedom and knowing the dangers. Zara gives a rueful shrug. Cesca looks as if she wishes she could run to Ravenna's side to join her.

Something like this will not just be a normal set of games. The challenges will be greater, and there will be more of them. Worse, with only the strongest gladiators chosen, if we are to fight, then there will be no easy victories. Just the thought of it fills me with dread.

I suspect that the Champions Trial will push us to our limits, and, with my powers still limited by the dampener I wear, I am not sure if I can do what it takes to survive.

“Now, those of you who are going to compete, come with me,” Lord Darius says.

Where is he leading us? What does he have planned? We don't know, but all we can do is follow.

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Lord Darius leads us into the depths of Ironhold, past storerooms and rooms reserved for punishments. The sight of them brings back unpleasant memories, and makes me wonder if maybe the selection of gladiators was just to get us alone, where we can be harmed more easily.

But no, that doesn't make sense. In Ironhold, Lord Darius already has power over us. He could command the soldiers to do anything he wished, including to kill us, if he thought he could justify it to the emperor as a punishment. As powerful as we all are, we would not survive long against a hail of arrows from the walls.

We head instead to a large circular room, a set of iron doors on one side, braziers set in a rough circle around the floor. They burst into flame as Lord Darius clicks his fingers, reminding us all of his power.

“You have all been chosen for different reasons,” he says. “Some of you have been chosen for your power. Others have been chosen because you are favorites of the crowd. A few of you have been selected by the emperor himself.”

He looks my way as he says it. That worries me almost more than the rest of it, because I have seen the emperor's eyes on me in the colosseum before. I have assumed that he has been looking at me with hatred because of his prophecy about his own downfall, but any kind of interest from someone so powerful is potentially very dangerous.

“I’ve brought you down here to tell you a little more about the challenges you are to face,” Lord Darius says. “The emperor wants you to be able to put on a good show.”

“Does that mean you’re going to tell us what each of the challenges is?” Alaric asks. I can feel the interest of everyone in the room. The more information we have, the more we will be able to prepare for what is to come.

“I am permitted to tell you something about the first three trials,” Lord Darius says. I can’t tell if he’s happy about being able to tell us that much, or if he feels that it will ruin the surprise. “In the first trial, you will face a deadly maze, filled with traps and dangerous creatures. To succeed, you must only make it to the other side. In the second, you will fight one on one in the circle of flames. In the third, you will fight against one of the others here, in an arena laced with traps and obstacles. Look around. These are the people you will end up fighting at some point during the Champions Trial.”

I swallow as he says those words. I can't stop myself from looking around, trying to imagine which of the people in the room I might end up fighting. The trials sound designed to force us to fight in new ways. The maze will be difficult, but maybe I can get through it without having to fight anyone. The fire circle is obviously designed to push us closer and closer together. The third trial sounds particularly brutal.

Which of them might I have to fight? What if I have to fight Alaric, or even Rowan? I can see everyone there looking around, trying to size the others up. In theory, we all know that we might be forced to fight one another at any moment, either in a practice bout or in the games.

In such trials, I will try to avoid killing my opponents, but the situations seem designed to push me into more and more brutal combat. I have killed before. I have done it when my mind has been caught up, entangled with beasts. I have done it reflexively. I have even unleashed a frost drake on a foe. But I have not set out to do it from the start of a bout. I have always tried to preserve as many lives as possible.

“Will Lyra be forced to wear the dampener?” Alaric asks.

“Of course she will,” Lord Darius says. “She has proved that she is uncontrollable without it, so it stays on until she shows that she is no threat to the citizens of the city. If she removes it, I’ll see her killed myself.”

Which means I will have to face the entire Champions Trial at a disadvantage. All the others will have full access to their powers. Alaric will be able to summon illusions. Rowan will have control over the earth. Ravenna will be able to control minds. But I... I will have a fraction of the power normally available to me to let me control beasts.

“In the chamber beyond, you will find an armory,” Lord Darius says. “Normally, we would select weapons for you, but for the Champions Trial, you may choose for yourselves. Pick whatever you wish, and take it with you to train with it.”

He moves to the iron doors at the other end of the room, opening them and letting us look inside. Armor and weapons are set on racks within, shining in the firelight. I move in there with the others, looking from one weapon and set of armor to the next.

“Don’t pick anything too different to what you would normally use,” Alaric suggests. “It might feel like a good idea to have heavy armor, but you’re not trained for it.”

He’s right. I have fought in the Colosseum in scraps of scale armor, wielding a net and trident. Those are the weapons I’ve trained with, more than any others. It makes no sense to switch them up now, and if I pick armor that’s too heavy, it will change the whole way I move.

So I settle for a set of light armor, with a scaled metal skirt, a shoulder guard, vambraces, and a couple of other patches of scale. There are no tridents, but I take a short, leaf headed spear about the same length, and with a bulbous metal base that is obviously designed as a club. There are no nets, so I take a chain instead, with a weight on one end and a hooked blade on the other. It is close enough to the same

kind of weapon. It's one I will have to cast and swing, trying to entangle my opponents, but maybe there is more scope to swing it to keep people at a distance than with the net.

The others are starting to pick out their weapons. Rowan has gone for heavier armor than he normally would, with solid plates on his shoulders, scale across some of his chest, and a crested helm. His shield is larger than usual, and he has picked a larger, curved sword.

Alaric sticks to his trusty vambraces, but augments them with some scale armor. He does not have his usual glass short swords, but instead has one longer curved sword and one long knife the length of his forearm. Both are made of the finest steel, etched with gold.

As we all search for our weapons, I can see the others sizing one another up. Some are talking, whispering to one another, possibly making alliances. For much of it we will be able to work together, so I guess that makes sense.

It still doesn't mean that I like it when Ravenna comes my way. She has chosen slightly heavier armor than usual: a close-fitting scale dress with patches of flesh left open, rather than the nearly scandalous patches of armor she is usually given to wear. She has found a spiked chain, and a curved dagger. It seems that she is taking no chances.

“What do you want, Ravenna?” I ask her.

“I want what I've always wanted, Lyra. For us to work together and be friends.”

There is no chance of that. Not after she controlled Naia. She's the one responsible for her betrayal, and probably arranged for her death. I can't forgive that. I start to go to say as much but I feel myself having second thoughts.

Maybe I should forgive her. After all, Ravenna has been a good friend to me. She has done a lot to introduce me to noble society, and if we just work together, I'm sure we could achieve so much. Wouldn't it be better if she and I were friends? The more I look at her, the more glorious she seems, almost shining with beauty and-

“That's enough.”

I don't know the voice, and I'm shocked when Vesper steps between us, holding up a hand to make Ravenna take a step back. I was under the impression that he didn't speak.

Ravenna looks momentarily angry, then takes a step back.

“This isn't your business.”

Vesper stares at her evenly.

Ravenna sighs. “Very well. But this is foolish, Lyra. Not wanting to be friends with me, just because I did what anyone would do under the circumstances.”

“Manipulate me, you mean?” I ask. “Put me in greater danger? And now you've tried to control me, Ravenna.”

I hear her sigh again. “Then we will do things the other way, Lyra.”

I can't be here anymore.

“Thank you,” I say to Vesper, and he nods, but I'm already leaving. I have the equipment I need for the Champions Trials. I have all the information that I'm going to get about them, so I retreat from the armory.

I don't know what's coming. I don't have enough information about the Champions Trials. Fear rises in me at the prospect of them. How am I going to survive them? How are any of us?

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The beast pens are one of the most spectacular parts of the fortress. Located beneath Ironhold, they contain cages and holding pens for all kinds of beasts. Some are simple livestock, kept there as food.

Most, however, are dangerous creatures bred or captured for use in the arena. There are giant snakes, armored ironhides with magnificent horns infused with metal, chimeras consisting of parts of multiple beasts, and of course the shadow cats.

I walk over to the pen where one of them is kept. The others are all within cages that are designed to constrain their abilities to walk from one shadow to the next. This particular shadow cat is more docile, however, particularly around me. I go to it and it rubs against me, purring like a kitten.

“I’ll never get used to that thing being so friendly,” Stefano, the master of beasts says. His talent is not for controlling beasts, because such a thing would put him in danger in a city that does not value such abilities. Instead, he has the talent for healing, able to undo damage with a touch.

Stefano is a man of middling years, dark haired and with a drooping moustache. He seems to like the way the beasts react to me, taking it as a sign that I belong here. I think he secretly hopes that when I complete my five seasons, I will agree to help him in the pits. I suspect that won’t be an option.

“I heard about the Champions Trial,” Stefano says. “I heard you were selected.”

I nod. “I’m not sure what that means.”

“It means you're one of the most popular gladiators in the games,” he replies. “It means people want to see you.”

“Or it means the emperor has decided this is a good way to get me killed,” I point out.

Stefano shrugs. “Or that. But if he really just wanted you killed, he would put you in alone against a half dozen gladiators. No beasts, no tricks, just too many people for you to fight.”

“But that, my dear Stefano, would look too much like an execution.” Alaric says it lightly as he approaches. “And the emperor wants to be seen to be fair.”

“Maybe,” Stefano says. “But you're telling me that if he really wanted her dead, he wouldn't find a match that she couldn't win?”

Alaric shrugs. “I have every faith in Lyra's abilities.”

That's more than I have right now. Around me I can feel the creatures, but it's as if I'm underwater, the pressure of the dampening cuff around my powers preventing me from just reaching out to take control of all of them. With an effort, I might be able to touch one, but no more than that.

“I'll give the two of you some space,” Stefano says. We often come down here to get away from everyone else. Alaric seems to prefer Stefano's healing to that of the actual healers within Ironhold, and it's one place where no one looks for us.

“I saw what happened with Ravenna,” Alaric says, as Stefano leaves. “She was trying to push you?”

I nod. “She just seems to do it naturally. Tries to manipulate everyone she meets.”

“It can make her a good ally,” Alaric points out. “And a dangerous enemy.”

“Are you telling me not to be angry with her? If she hadn't interfered in the last set of games, Naia might still be alive.”

Alaric takes me in his arms. It still feels so strange, him holding me. I had always assumed that anything that happened between us would be brief, fleeting, purely physical. Instead, we still seem to be together in spite of the danger of this place.

“She might,” he admits. “But that doesn't mean that you pick a fight with Ravenna. She's dangerous.”

“So, you want me to pretend to be her friend?” I ask.

Alaric smiles. “As if you would be any good at pretending anything, Lyra. Your face seems to show everything you feel. Which is normally a beautiful trait. For one thing, it means I know when I've done something right around you.”

“Were you planning to do many things wrong?” I counter. “Have you been out seducing noble women when I haven't been watching?”

“The rumors say that you're the one to watch in that regard,” Alaric says, with a hint of jealousy that darkens his expression.

The truth though in his case, the mysterious patron who calls him from Ironhold is his mother, while mine is Lady Elara, who seeks to teach me more about being a beast whisperer. Not that I've told Alaric that part, but he trusts me when I say that Lady Elara merely seems to have decided that I'm someone to be seen near. Perhaps he believes that I'm going to be a rising star as well.

“I can't be Ravenna's friend,” I say.

“Well, we're making some progress, then,” Alaric says. “Soon, I will make you every bit as cold and ruthless as I am.”

I put my hand on his chest. “Do you know you’re neither of those things, right? I've seen the other side of you. You don't need to pretend with me.”

Alaric’s smile widens. “Or maybe pretense is all I have. Maybe I pretend to you that I'm sweet and light, when everybody else sees the real me.”

I shake my head. “You're not going to convince me that easily.”

“No? You know that I kill in the arena more easily than you do. Killing people just for the glory seems pretty cruel to me.”

He raises an eyebrow in challenge. It's as if he's trying to drive me away, to poke and prod at the edges of what I feel, as if he's still trying to find the limits with me. Maybe he is. Alaric is not someone who can leave things alone.

“Are you trying to drive me away?” I ask.

I hear him sigh. “Maybe I just know you need that much distance.”

“Why?”

“In case you need to fight me, Lyra.”

Those words are like ice in my veins. I know what he’s talking about.

“The third challenge,” I say.

Alaric nods. “Exactly. What will you do if you are drawn against me for it?”

“What will you do?” I counter.

“I... don’t know,” he admits. “I can't stand the idea of ever hurting you, but if we do nothing in that challenge, I'm pretty sure we both end up dead. Could I stand there? Could I let you just kill me?”

He says it as if he's actually considering it. I put my hand on his face and kiss him. “Don't think like that. We probably won't be drawn against one another anyway, and if we are, we will find another way. I won't kill you.”

“And I'm pretty sure that I can't kill you,” Alaric says.

“Only ‘pretty sure’?” I say.

Alaric shrugs. “I like to be honest about these things. I care about you, obviously, but could either of us really deprive the world of... well, me ?”

I laugh. It's probably what he wants. Somehow, Alaric has the knack of taking all the death in this place and turning into something to make fun of. His deliberately extravagant arrogance is a part of that.

“We’ll get through this,” I tell him.

“I hope so,” he says. “I want us to get to a point where I can actually dare to dream about the future.”

“You don't dare already?” I ask. “Aren’t you certain that you’ll make your five seasons?”

“Well yes obviously,” Alaric says, but then he lets the mask of his arrogance fall. “But we both know anything could happen. One sword thrust in the wrong place,

that's all it takes. You know you've ruined me for the arena, Lyra?"

That catches me by surprise. I can't imagine how anything I've done could possibly make it harder for Alaric to succeed in the colosseum.

"I've ruined you? How?"

His smile turns wan and wistful. "Because you've given me something to care about. A reason why it matters whether I live or die."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" I say. The fact that he cares about me like that makes warmth spread through me. I've been worried that anything between us can only be physical, but now, it seems clear that I mean so much more to him than that. My heart sings with that.

"Caring about that kind of thing can be dangerous. And you... I care what happens to you too. Especially when they won't have let you have your full powers. I could... I could cut away that cuff if you wanted. Either now or... maybe in the middle of a bout, if you really needed it? I could make it look like an accident."

I know what he's offering, and a part of me wants to snatch at that offer. I'm grateful for it. I don't think that anyone other than Alaric would make it to me. He must know it's a risk to himself, but he doesn't care. Or rather, he cares about me more.

I also know that I can't accept.

"There's no way anyone will believe it's an accident after last time," I say. "I only salvaged that situation because I was the one to put the cuff back on. If it were to happen again, it would be obvious it was preplanned, and then... then we would both be punished for it."

My survival relies on my powers staying bound, after my powers accidentally set a wraith loose among the crowd in the previous season. Aetheria already sees beast whisperers as something too dangerous to be allowed to live. If I start taking the dampener off whenever it is to my benefit, I will give people all the evidence they need to condemn me.

It's also too close to what Naia did. Alaric is asking for permission, but it would feel like the same kind of betrayal. I can't allow it.

“If you won't let me do that, then maybe we need to find other ways of gaining an advantage,” Alaric says.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask.

“Lord Darius has given us some basic details about the challenges, but I'm sure that there will be more out there, if only so people can place their bets accurately,” Alaric says. “We should both seek audiences with our patrons, and ask them if they've heard anything.”

"With your mother, you mean?" I say. "You can say it with me."

“It's hard to be open here, even with you,” Alaric says. “If only because I never know who else might be listening. Who might use it against me.”

The worst part is that he's right. Ironhold has its politics and its petty rivalries. There are plenty who would hurt each of us if they had the chance. It is better not to risk it by saying the wrong thing.

“You're right, though,” I say. “I will seek an audience with Lady Elara. Maybe she will have heard more.”

And maybe she can teach me more, too. I need her to. With my powers restricted, I need her to teach me something that might help me survive.

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“Concentrate, Lyra!” Lady Elara says.

“I am concentrating,” I reply, trying to focus on feeling the animals around me as I stand in front of the great statue of the goddess Deira, mistress of beasts.

The temple of Deira is far below the city. To get to it we must slip from Lady Elara’s grand palanquin, heading down hidden stairs and through dank passageways. Aetheria has built over itself so many times that there is a whole other city beneath the city, containing its crypts and its sewers, tunnels and even mines.

This temple has been cleared out by the beast whisperers, but even so, moss clings to some of the walls and trailing plants wind around the pillars. I am wearing the dark robes of the spectral covenant, the collection of beast whisperers who hide from the persecution of the city and seek to change things.

This is the place I come to learn from Lady Elara, although that is far from easy when I have the dampener on my wrist.

“How am I meant to do anything with this?” I ask. It's hard not to blame her, when the dampener was her idea.

“It was a necessary step to save your life,” Lady Elara says. “And it is also a path to greater power for you. Didn't you feel the way your power built up behind it before?”

I did. When Naia cut the dampener from me the first time, the power that came roaring out felt like waters that had gathered behind a dam. I'm not sure if that is something inherent to the design of such a dampener, or if it is something that Lady

Elara has built in. Either way, the rush of power was almost more than I could cope with.

“What use is having power behind it if I die in the arena in the next few days?” I ask.

“That's why you have to focus,” Lady Elara says. “The dampener does not cut you off from your power completely. You can pull threads of it past the dampening effect if you are careful.”

“Threads?” I say. “I can feel animals, but that's about it.”

She shakes her head. “You can do more than that. I'm convinced you can. You should be able to borrow a pair of eyes to exert some small influence over a single animal. You may even be able to do... more.”

There's something about the way she says that word that hints at the nature of the power she's suggesting I use. I look up at the statue of the goddess, small animals coming to her hands, but a bloodied wolf beneath her feet. Again and again my teacher has told me that the goddess has two sides to her: she is a protector of nature, but she is also a huntress, willing to dominate and kill beasts as well as soothe them and speak with them.

It is a side of the power that I am not comfortable with, even though I have used it in the past. I have forced a chimera to tear itself apart, each element fighting the others. I have taken over a frost drake and used it as a weapon in the arena. I have done all of these things, but that still doesn't mean I'm comfortable with that side of these powers.

“What do you mean by more?” I ask.

“You can bring back a fraction of a creature's attributes,” Lady Elara says.

“Depending on which one you choose you might be able to see in the dark, or have their strength. There are some among us who can make their nails like claws, or poison people with venomous bites.”

I shudder at the thought of changing myself into a weapon, risking my humanity like that.

“Don't dismiss it so quickly,” Lady Elara says. “I'm not saying you have to take on those more extreme attributes. But some of them may be useful, and you've already done it a little. Or did you think all that dodging in the arena was just down to seeing through the eyes of the birds? You borrowed their reflexes as well, their knack for wheeling and turning, avoiding the attacks of predators. Don't tell me that isn't useful.”

“So what are you not telling me about this?” I ask her. She looks too eager as she stands there on the dais beneath the goddess. There's obviously something she's not telling me. There always is. Lady Elara does not let me into her full plans, even though it seems I'm central to them.

She wants a beast whisperer to be seen to do well in the arena, to gain the love and support of the watching crowds, to show them that we are not just animals. She thinks that might help to undo some of the persecution sent our way. But she also thinks I might be able to play a role in bringing down the corrupt system of Aetheria, and overthrowing the emperor to put in one who might treat the people well. I'm not sure if I want to risk everything like that.

Because I am the one risking everything. I'm the only beast whisperer people know exists. Lady Elara hides behind her skills with illusions, not showing the other side of her powers. The other members of the spectral covenant either hide themselves the same way or stay below ground. I am the one they are holding up, hoping that I will be able to make a change. It means I'm also the one who bears the brunt of any anger.

“Just try,” Lady Elara says. “Find one animal here and connect to it.”

I reach out with my power. It is so much more difficult with the dampener in place, but I can feel the presence of a small lizard on the wall. I have to focus so much to be able to strengthen that contact into a true connection.

“Good,” Lady Elara looks pleased by that. “Now borrow from it. Such a creature can see in every direction. Borrow that sense from it. Picture what you want to take, reach out and pull it along the thread of your power.”

I'm breathing hard with the effort of it, beads of sweat breaking out on my body. I feel like someone with only a glimmer of power trying to match the workings of an archon. And yet I feel something coming back along the connection between me and the lizard. I blink, and a moment later, it's as if I can see so much more of the temple. I can see everything there.

I can see Lady Elara swinging a stick at me from behind. I reach out and catch it without thinking. That only makes her smile.

“There, I knew you could do it. Now let the power go. You wouldn't want to be stuck with lizard eyes.”

The thought of that makes me abandon my control, letting go of what I've taken. I hear a sound of pain from the side of the room, and I hurry over to see the lizard lying dead on the floor.

“What? What happened?” I demand looking around at Lady Elara.

“The creature clearly wasn't strong enough to withstand giving so much of itself to you,” she says. “That can happen sometimes.”

“You never said that was a possibility,” I say, feeling as though I've been tricked. I feel sick at the sight of the dead lizard. It has died, and for what? To let me practice a skill that I never wanted in the first place?

“If I had, would you have tried?” she asks. “The nature of our power can be cruel, Lyra. I don't know how many times I have to say that. But we are working for the good of all the people of Aetheria. You must put aside your qualms and do whatever is necessary.”

“This wasn't necessary,” I retort. “You could have simply told me what to do. Will this happen every time I do it?”

“Not every time,” she says. “If you are careful about how you return the power, and the animal is strong enough, it will live. But don't try to hold on too long for their sake. That's how you can end up with patches of fur or claws that won't go away. Hold too much of the beast in you for too long, and you can end up as one.”

This new power is unnerving. Why would I do something that might permanently change me and kill something else? I know the answer to that: because in the arena I might not have a choice. Here I did, though, and now a creature lies dead because of it.

Lady Elara takes my hands, forcing me to look at her.

“You must remember what all of this is about. It is vital that you survive and thrive in the arena. The people must see you as a hero. Already there is unrest in the city. Guards are attacked, houses burned. People call for the emperor's death, but not enough! The emperor commanded these Champions Trials precisely because he needs a distraction for the citizenry. He no longer has the absolute control of the city that he had before. If we can keep this going, there is a chance for things to change for real.”

“To install a new emperor, you mean?” I say.

“One who will be kinder to the people. One who will be kinder to our people.”

I have heard her and the other beast whisperers talking before. I've heard them speak about the possibility of assassinating the emperor, about overthrowing him even if they don't need to do that. They have pulled me into treason, but with what I've seen in the city I'm not entirely sure they're wrong.

Things need to change, and my part of that change comes within the arena. But I can only do it if I survive. As harsh as these powers are, I need them, because the Champions Trials are coming, and without them I will fail.

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It is evening by the time I return to Ironhold, carried in the luxury of Lady Elara's palanquin. I see a few jealous eyes on me as I walk back into the fortress. Arctus looks as though he can't understand why I am the one who gets to go out and he does not. Even Rowan looks wistful, as if wishing someone would take him from Ironhold, calling him down into the city.

Would he actually want it, though? A patron would likely treat him in much the same way that his old mistress did. I can't imagine Rowan wanting that when it seems that all he wants is to get through his seasons and leave Aetheria.

I see some of the others still working at the practice posts. Ravenna is there, accustoming herself to her new weapons. She looks over as I pass, saying something to a small crowd of onlookers. Because of course even here she has admirers and onlookers, a group of men and women watching her every movement with longing. That group laughs at whatever she says. I'm sure it isn't flattering to me.

I don't see Alaric yet. Possibly, he is still out with his mother, although he won't be able to stay out much later without the guards going hunting for him. Even as a free gladiator, there are limits to what he can do.

I need to practice as well and for the same reasons as Ravenna. Well, not all the same reasons. I'm not doing it so I can attract the attention of others, but I do need to acclimatize myself to my new weapons. They should handle in a similar way to my net and trident, but I'm sure there are nuances that I need to understand before the trials.

So I collect my weapons and make my way around the practice spaces until I find a

practice spot a little way from everything else. In one of the many practice rooms, there is a post hanging down from the ceiling so that it swings freely. And as it swings, poles thrust from the walls, jabbing towards the center. It is an environment where I will have to hit and move, but it is also a small room where there is only limited space to dodge.

That makes it perfect for replicating the kinds of conditions I might face in the arena this time. I already know that at least one of the fights will be a head-to-head bout, hemmed in by flames. That won't give me as much room as usual to hit and run, to dodge and tumble out of danger.

I start to work with my new weapons, accustoming myself to the weight, not just of them, but of my armor as well. I hit with the spear, thrusting at the post, then weaving away from the attacks of the poles. It is hard work, especially after a day of working on my powers. I'm sure all the other gladiators believe that I have wasted the day in decadent luxury, but instead I've been working hard, trying to learn the limits of what I can do with the dampener on my wrist.

“Remember that you can slice with this weapon as well as thrust.”

I spin around at the words and find myself facing Vesper, who is watching me from the doorway. He has arrived without a sound. That is less surprising than the fact he's just spoken.

“I thought you didn't talk to people?” I say.

“Most people aren't worth talking to,” Vesper replies. His voice is soft, as if he isn't used to speaking much, but it resonates through the room.

“And I am?” I ask.

Vesper shrugs. “The fact that Ravenna seems so interested in you suggests that there's more to you than meets the eye, and I have been paying attention to what you've been achieving in the colosseum. It's obvious that you're one of the favorites in the Champions Trials.”

I think about Alaric and Rowan. “I'm not sure if I'm the favorite.”

“You're being too modest. You have more power than most. Maybe more than anyone there, although they're making you hold back. It makes sense for people to work together, doesn't it?”

"You're asking to be my ally?" I say. It catches me by surprise because recently it has seemed that few people have wanted to be by my side. Or maybe I just haven't been prepared to trust them after Naia's betrayal.

“It doesn't have to be anything that formal if you're not comfortable with it,” Vesper says. “I help you, you help me, and we both try and get through this.”

There's a simplicity to that I like, so I extend my hand to him. He takes it.

"Would you like to work some more with your spear?" he asks. He has his own weapons, short, half-moon blades that seem to fit over his fists.

“It's probably not safe to spar with these,” I say. “I've not fully adjusted to my new weapons and if either of us suffers an injury now, it could slow us down, in the contest.”

Vesper nods. “A good point. But make sure you do practice. I'm pretty sure there's a reason there was no trident back in the armory.”

That thought sets suspicion running through me. I had thought that it was simply that

they wanted us to have new, better weapons for this contest. But if there had been a trident and net, wouldn't I have taken them? Instead, I have ended up with subtly different weapons.

It's easy to think now that might be deliberate, an attempt to force me to use something I'm not entirely familiar with. If so, it points to the kind of manipulation and politics within the games that I've tried to avoid.

Vesper leaves, and I realize that he isn't the only one within the Champions Trials I might be able to bring over to my side. If I can persuade people to work together for this, maybe we can get through it as a group, and fewer of us will have to be hurt.

I think about my options. Vex is a non-starter. He's the one who drove a dagger into Naia's heart. It's clear he doesn't like me, and I hate him for what he did. Ravenna is just as culpable, and while I'm sure she would offer to side with me to my face, I can't trust her.

Rowan and Alaric will probably help me, but there are still a few gladiators who are probably undecided. The more of those I can bring to my side, the better.

I go looking through the fortress, trying to find those who have been chosen for the trials. It isn't long before I find Malira working hard with a long blade that she holds two-handed. I had expected her to choose something swift and agile for her weapon, but it seems that this one doesn't slow her down, and she barely seems constrained by gravity either. She's happy to run up the walls of the room where she's working, flipping this way and that, attacking in breathtaking sweeps of the weapon.

She looks around as I enter.

"What do you want?" she asks. Her tone isn't friendly, and I'm not sure what I've done to deserve that. She doesn't even know me.

“I came to talk to you,” I say. “With the trials coming up, I thought maybe we would have a better chance of surviving if we-”

"Oh, you want to team up with me, do you? Should I be flattered, the great beast whisperer Lyra, coming to speak with little me?" Malira shakes her head. "I'm not interested."

She spits out the words as if she already dislikes me.

“I don't know what this is,” I say. “Have I done something to offend you?”

"Aside from walking around here like you're the greatest of all of us?" Malira says. "You know no one gets any attention now but you, right? Everything I hear is Lyra this, and Lyra that. And as far as I can see, you don't even work as hard as the rest of us. Your precious patron keeps whisking you away. Well, all the time you've been spending in some noble's pleasure gardens, I've been working. And if you're just realizing that you might need my help, you're too late."

I can't tell her the truth of what I've been doing with Lady Elara, but this hostility seems unwarranted.

“You don't know me,” I say.

“I know enough to know that I'll make a name for myself if I defeat you in the arena,” she says. “I learned that in the pits. You fight the toughest person there and suddenly everyone gives you respect.”

So that's what this is. She has decided that her route to fame and glory lies through me.

“We don't know if we'll be matched up,” I say. “There's no benefit to us being

enemies.”

“Better that than the alternative,” Malira shoots back. “I’ve heard how you treat your friends.”

“I don’t know who you’ve been listening to, but-”

“Malira has been listening to the truth. I’m sorry I’m late for our training session, Malira.”

I spin around to see Vex entering the room. He has chosen heavier armor than usual, plates of it protecting him, when normal gladiator armor would leave large portions unprotected so the crowd can be entertained with blood. Belts of knives cross and recross his torso, there so that he can use his magic to levitate them and send them at his foes.

“What truth is that, Vex? That you killed Naia without a second thought?”

“That you secretly conspired with the opposition in a bout,” Vex says. “That the two of you were planning to betray me. The after the bout you broke our alliance and threatened to kill me. That you’re a beast whisperer, too wild to be trusted.”

I look over at Malira, and I see her nodding along with Vex. It’s obvious he’s gotten to her, whispered poison in her ear. Combine that with the way she sees me as a means to gain fame, and I know I can’t make an ally of her.

I seem to have found another enemy, for no better reason than because I have been successful in the games. It will just be one more danger to look out for in the Champions Trials.

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The first morning of the Champions Trial seems to come far too soon. There is a procession down from Ironhold to the Colosseum, but it is a much smaller procession than usual. Only those who have been selected for the trials are a part of it. There is not even the usual wagon train of beasts following us. I get the feeling that any that will be involved in the trials have already been taken into the city.

Instead, there's just us, a collection of gladiators, dressed in new and shining armor carrying a varied selection of weapons, marching together, while the crowds line the way and cheer their support for us.

“Lyra! Lyra!” I hear my name being chanted in parts of the crowd, but it's not the only one. People are chanting for Alaric, for Ravenna, for Vex. Even Rowan has his followers, although he seems to be determined to ignore them. Not like Alaric, who spins and dances for the attention of the crowd, or Ravenna, who seems to delight in people fighting for her favor.

Our route is the usual circuitous one into the city, passing through the slums on the outskirts, then through wealthier districts where statues line the roads and illusions decorate the houses. There are illusory versions of some of us along the way, showing moments from our greatest victories in the colosseum. There is an image of me with beasts winding around me, obeying my every whim.

There is an image of Vex in the moment he killed Naia. Someone has decided that represents a great victory for him, but just the sight of it makes me feel as though someone is tearing my heart out. Alaric is there by my side in that moment, not touching me, not able to acknowledge everything between us but just there, as if he knows exactly how much pain this will cause me.

The colosseum looms ahead, and it is decorated in even more spectacular fashion than it would be for the usual sets of games. Illusions flow back and forth over it, so that every statue on it seems to move, gladiators coming to life on it to reenact battle after battle. The crowds are thicker here than I have seen them before, and when we go into the colosseum itself, there are more people watching from the stands than I could have believed would fit into the space. Ordinarily, it takes time for the stands to fill, but now, they are already awash with people. They cheer or boo. Some sell food, while I'm sure that thieves ply their trade with so many people packed so close together. The betting booths are already busy, the odds on each of the gladiators set out, so that people might bet on each round, or on their chances of surviving the whole contest.

Nobles are in their boxes, attended by their servants and shaded by silken awnings. I can see Lady Elara up there, watching. And, of course, there is a box for the emperor, although he has yet to enter it.

What catches my eye is not any of that, however. Instead, it is the way the floor of the colosseum has been reshaped by magic, or by the efforts of engineers, producing a maze that seems to fill the whole arena. From where I am standing, I cannot see within it, but I can hear the sounds of beasts in there, and I am sure it will be filled with deadly perils.

Even as I stand there staring at it, the emperor arrives to a fanfare from horns that brings the crowd to silence. He stands there in his purple robes of office, wearing a golden laurel crown atop his head as if he is drinking in the attention of the crowd. He waits for several seconds before he speaks.

“Citizens of Aetheria, normally I would have an announcer do this, but these are no ordinary games. These are the Champions Trials!”

Even that gets a cheer from the crowd. The emperor waits for them to settle down

before he continues, obviously reveling in their attention.

“Such trials have not been held in a long time, but now we have a group of gladiators worthy of attempting them. Look at them. We have Vex, son of a line of gladiators stretching back generations!”

Vex seems to take that as his cue to step forward and raise one armored arm, holding a dagger so that it catches the light.

“We have Ravenna, noble and beautiful.”

She curtsies as if the movement is for the emperor alone, then blows a kiss to the waiting stands.

“Here we have Alaric, the trickster champion of illusions.”

Alaric steps forward. Only three of him do so at once, all bowing in different directions to the crowd.

On and on the introductions go. The free gladiators are introduced first by the emperor, because this is Aetheria, and such distinctions matter within it. The others are introduced, and I'm conscious that the emperor has not said my name yet, has not called me forward.

Could this all be some vicious trick? Could he have decided not to include me in these trials after all? That possibility fills me with a strange sense of dread. I should be grateful for the possibility of getting out of these trials, avoiding the danger of them, but instead, I want this. I want this chance to prove myself in front of the crowd. And I want this chance to progress one more season towards my freedom.

Just when I think the emperor is not going to say my name at all, he gestures my way.

“And finally, the dreaded beast whisperer. The one who set a wraith among the crowds and who freed a frost drake above Aetheria: Lyra!”

The emperor makes me sound like a villain, and it means that the booing and jeering almost drown out the cheers of those who wish to support me. Even so, with the huge numbers of people in the Colosseum, there are more than enough who wish to cheer me on, too.

I remember my part in this show just in time. I step forward, raising my spear in acknowledgement of the crowd’s support. That seems to intensify the sounds from the crowd, both positive and negative. I’m sure some of them would be happy to see me fall, while others are hoping that I will succeed. I wonder how many have put money on me. In my first games, almost nobody did. In my second, people saw me as powerful and backed me. Now, with the dampener around my wrist, how many people really believe that I can succeed?

There is no way of knowing that and no chance to really think about it, because the emperor is speaking again.

"Those are your gladiators. Each of them is prepared to die for the honor of Aetheria and the glory of your entertainment!"

That is a lie. For how many of the gladiators is it really about honor? Maybe for Alaric, although even he seeks glory mostly as a way of impressing his family. The other free gladiators all have their own reasons, while the rest of us have no choice in the matter. If I were to declare that I did not wish to face these trials, I would probably be executed. Certainly, I would be punished harshly.

But that is not the story the emperor wishes to tell, nor is it a story that the crowd wishes to hear. They want tales of daring fighters, ready to give their lives for the crowd’s entertainment.

The emperor is speaking again, explaining the terms of this first challenge.

“A Champions Trial is different to the normal games,” he says. “These gladiators will not just be facing one another on the sand. Instead, they will face the most cunning situations my master of the games, my arch magistrate and my artificers have been able to devise. The first challenge is the maze. At intervals, each of the gladiators will enter the maze in front of you. You can see it from above, but they have no idea about its twists and turns, or about the dangers that await within. Rest assured that there are dangers, and if any of them is unwary, they may well die in there.”

I feel as though the emperor is looking my way as he speaks. Does he want me to die in this maze? It seems that again and again he has played a role in giving me challenges that would kill most gladiators, even most beast whisperers. Does he really think I'm that much of a threat to his rule?

"The goal of the gladiators is simply to make it to the other side of the maze," the emperor says. "In this challenge, they are not required to fight one another, although they are welcome to do so if they think it will be more entertaining. If they make it through the gate at the far side, they have succeeded and will face the next challenge tomorrow."

He makes it sound simple when I doubt it will be anything other than dangerous at every step. We line up, ready to go. I'm not entirely surprised when I'm the first one to wave forward.

“The first gladiator to face the maze will be Lyra Thornwind!” the emperor declares.

I step up to the entrance, readying my weapons and taking a deep breath. I don't know what waits for me beyond the entryway, but I'm determined, whatever it is, that I will find a way through this.

Accompanied by the cheers of the crowd, I plunge into the maze.

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The first thing that hits me is the silence. The noise of the crowd is gone, somehow kept at bay by magic. Perhaps it is designed to stop people from calling out directions to me, making it harder for me to find my way through.

The second thing I notice is that the passages seem to shift around me. I'm sure it is illusion, but the walls of the passages feel real. I edge through the corridors of the maze, moving slowly and carefully, certain that there is danger around every corner. Almost immediately, I'm forced to make choices about which direction to go in, turning left and right almost at random to start with.

I can hear the sounds of beasts around me, but I have yet to run into any. I keep moving forward, and then I feel the floor shift beneath my feet. I hear something click, and pure instinct makes me throw myself into a roll. Darts flash over my head, embedding themselves in the far wall. I come up to my feet, knowing that if I'd been a fraction of a second slower, I would have been wounded or even killed by them. My heart beats faster as I move on.

I find another trap a couple of corridors later. I am probing the ground in front of me with my spear, and so it is that which triggers the trap. This time, the ground gives way ahead of me, revealing spikes beneath as I fight to keep my balance on the edge of the pit. My arms wheel, and I fling my weighted chain back, digging into the sand with the curved blade on the end and pulling myself back from the edge.

I breathe harder as I make it to safety. If I had been walking forward, or worse yet trying to hurry through the maze, I would have plummeted to my death on those spikes.

Are the crowd roaring and gasping with my near misses? I have no way of knowing. I am cut off, alone. I'm sure by now that some of the other gladiators must have entered the maze, but I have no way of knowing where they are, or if they are facing similar dangers.

I cross the pit using my weighted chain. I dig one end into the ground, then toss the bladed end across like a grappling hook to embed itself on the far side. I test the security of that hold, and when I'm satisfied, I start to walk across the chain like a tightrope, holding my spear crossways to help me balance.

I edge forward, taking my time, feeling every breath of air that seeks to unbalance me. I can feel the tension running through my body with the need to hold myself on such a narrow surface. I have trained to fight, but this is more of a circus trick, progressing little by little across the expanse of the pit.

It feels like forever before I reach the other side. I breathe a sigh of relief once I do so, and I collect my weighted chain. Already, it is proving more useful than my net would have, but it is time for me to move on. I still need to find my way through the rest of this maze, although the illusions, or whatever magic it is within this place, mean this seems far larger than the arena should be able to contain. I'm not sure how long it will take to get through the maze, or what other dangers I will face on the way.

I keep moving forward. I reach a junction, and instinct makes me pause as I hear a growl coming from my right. I may not have my full powers, but I can reach out to feel the presence of a monstrous beast, like a giant porcupine only with blades instead of quills. I quietly back away from it, going in the other direction.

I keep my senses extended as far as the dampener will allow me. I may not be able to control the beasts of the maze easily, but at least I can feel the ones close to me. I can feel which turnings would lead straight to their lairs, forcing me to confront them. It means I can avoid them. At least, I hope that's what it means.

The problem is I don't know what route I'm meant to take. I'm wandering blindly, trying to avoid the creatures within this place, trying to keep myself from having to fight unless I must. That is just a desire to avoid hurting any of the creatures; without access to my full powers, I am vulnerable. There is a real risk that if I fight them, I might be hurt or killed. For now, at least, I continue to avoid all I can.

But I need to find a route through this maze, and it can't just be blundering my way through. There's too much of a chance that I will run into a trap or be forced to take a route that includes a dangerous beast if I just keep going like this.

Somewhere behind me the eerie silence of the maze is broken by the sound of combat, and the roars of a creature. It seems that the silence of the maze only keeps out sound from beyond its walls; it doesn't stop me from hearing what's going on elsewhere. I stop and focus, trying to work out where the others are within the maze.

Do I want to meet them? If I find Alaric or Rowan, or even Vesper, then maybe they will help me to get through, but there are others who would be more dangerous to run into. I don't doubt that Ravenna will try to control me, maybe make me walk straight into a trap, or wander ahead of her so that any beast she meets will devour me rather than her. Vex will probably send daggers after me as soon as he sees me, and one downside of not having my net anymore is that I can't just catch them out of the air the way I have in the past.

I need a better understanding of what's going on in the maze. I need a sense of where its twists and turns are. In the past in the arena I have taken control of the eyes of all the birds around the colosseum, looking through all of them at once so this I can see every facet of an opponent's movements.

I don't have the strength for that anymore, but my work with Lady Elara has showed me that I am not completely helpless either. I concentrate, reaching out, trying to feel for anything beyond the maze. It is hard work. There is a barrier of a kind there, and

that barrier seems to be designed to control sound and physical force, to contain everything within the maze and ensure that the crowd are not harmed by any magic that's used in here.

My mind is able to slip beyond it, trying to find a suitable bird. I feel the presence of a carrion crow, waiting in the knowledge that the presence of so many people means it will be fed as it has so many times before on the flesh of the slain. It takes concentration, but even with the dampener on my wrist, I am able to slide into its mind, seeing as it sees. I set it wheeling above the maze, and now I can see the layout of it. I can see the others within it, some already fighting creatures, others moving cautiously. One gladiator I don't know well is down, his throat torn out and blood staining the ground beneath him. There is no sign of the creature that did it.

I stand there staring at the images from the crow for a while, trying to work out where I am in relation to the exit, then trying to plot a route through the maze that will allow me to avoid the worst of the creatures. I think I can start to see a way through, and I pad forward, still being careful to test the ground in front of me with my spear. It's just as well, because a bear trap springs shut ahead of me.

I try not to think about what will happen if such a thing springs shut on my leg. It will not kill me outright, but it will mean I cannot make progress through the maze. Worse, it seems like the kind of thing designed to make someone scream in agony or call out for help. Either option is likely to draw the attention of the creatures within the maze.

I keep moving forward, using the crow's vision to guide me, even as I test the ground around me for traps, and try to sense the presence of any beasts nearby. Twice, I have to take different turnings to avoid creatures. This is taking longer than I thought it would, and I'm still not anywhere near the exit.

I don't hurry, though. There is no time limit on this task, and I have already seen that

hurrying could fling me headlong into danger. It is better to keep moving cautiously, trying to be ready for any threat ahead.

It is not long before I come to a square chamber within the maze, the junction of several passages. There is multi-colored sand on the floor, and it takes me a moment to realize that the sand disguises several pressure plates. There are obviously more traps here. I start to make my way through the room, knowing that the corridor I need is on the far side.

Even as I do it, though, a figure moves into the room, walking on the walls, as if the whole world were at 90 degrees to my reality. Malira is carrying her large two-handed sword almost casually and there is blood on the blade. She smiles as she sees me.

I hold up my hands. "There is no reason for us to fight, Malira. You heard what the emperor said. We only need to get out of here. I can show you the way."

"I'll find the way," she promises. "And I told you before, the best way for me to build a reputation is to go through you. I kill you, and everyone will chant my name."

She flips down to the floor, her blade in her hands. She smiles, baring her teeth in a predatory fashion. Then she charges, and I must defend myself or die.

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Malira's charge is a chaotic, hopping thing that makes it hard to read which direction she will come from. I swing my weighted chain, trying to keep her at a distance, adrenaline rushing through me as I find myself in a fight that I did not want or expect.

The worst part is that there's no reason why she should be my enemy, except that Vex got to her and started talking to her before I could. Malira swings a thunderous blow at my head, and I barely dodge in time to avoid it. I hear a click as my foot touches one of the pressure plates on the ground and I throw myself aside as a spear shoots across the chamber, only just missing both of us.

Malira bares her teeth again. "That's going to make this interesting. But then, I don't need to use the floor."

She runs up one of the walls, swinging at me, forcing me to duck. I jab with my spear, making her move away, but she comes back at me again. The ferocity of her attack is hard to contain when she is moving so quickly and attacking from such unpredictable angles. I barely get my weapons up in time to protect myself.

"You're not so dangerous without a bunch of animals to do your fighting for you," Malira snarls, attacking again and again. My training has given me considerable skills by this point, but there's no denying that she's right: I am much less dangerous when I can't call an animal to my side to aid me.

I end up having to use the traps on the floor to try to hold her off, stepping on them deliberately, so that the spears fly across the space in which we're fighting. We both need to dodge when that happens, and it means I get some respite.

But she's still advancing, still attacking, I'm not sure I can beat her in a straight up fight. I keep using my chain to force her to move away from me, and I slash with my spear in an attempt to stop closing the distance in between sweeps of the chain. But I know there's only so long I will be able to keep it up, and I don't like the thought of what will happen when she manages to make it inside the arc of the weapons.

Even now, she's closing in, moving from unpredictable angles, her great sword raised, ready to attack. As she does it, though, another figure enters the room, moving up behind up on nearly silent feet. Vesper is advancing on her, his curved blades ready in his fists.

Malira must see me look his way, because she turns at the last minute, arresting her charge and bringing her sword up to block. It means that she stops the blade aimed at her throat, but she still cries out as she suffers a nasty wound on her side.

Malira falls back, looking from me to Vesper, as if trying to decide if she can take both of us. She clearly decides that she can't, because she stands and runs from the chamber, leaving the two of us alone.

"Are you all right?" Vesper asks.

I nod. "Thank you for saving me. I owe you my life."

"Well, you can repay me by helping me to get out of here," Vesper says. "I figure we stand a better chance of getting through the maze if we work together."

That sounds good to me. I have just seen the danger of trying to progress alone when there are other gladiators here who are my enemies. There are so few of us in the Champions Trial. How is it that most of them seem to be interested in hurting me?

"I can find the way," I tell Vesper. "If you stick with me, we might be able to

overcome any challenges in our way.”

He gestures for me to lead the way, so I do, picking one of the tunnels out of this chamber and testing the ground ahead of me again with my spear.

“You're sure this is the way?” Vesper asks.

“I can see through the eyes of one of the birds above,” I explain. “My powers are more limited than they were, but I can still do that, and I can sense when beasts are close.”

It's a combination that means we can make progress, avoiding the most dangerous spots while continuing through the maze. I hear the sounds of battle again somewhere behind us. Through the eyes of the bird, I can see Vex taking a more direct route, using his knives to slice through a spider the size of a small horse.

He has the advantage in that respect. I must move around all the animals within the maze because I cannot control them. I must find a route that does not involve so much combat.

It means winding our way deeper and deeper into the maze, then finding a route out again. The way to the exit seems clear, although I know better than to trust that, still testing the ground, still trying to make sure we're not about to fall into any traps.

Ahead, there is another large chamber, and the lack of obvious threats within it makes me cautious. Perhaps there is a trap there that I do not see, but as far as I can tell, there are only the broken bases of several pillars, casting shadows on the ground from the sun above. There is a passage beyond the chamber that I know will lead to the exit. Given how far we've come, there is no other route that makes sense. We must go this way.

“What are we waiting for?” Vesper asks.

“I'm not sure. Something just feels... wrong about this.”

“We need to go this way, don't we?” he says. He might not have my bird's eye view of the maze, but at this point, there isn't any other way we can go.

“Yes,” I admit.

“Then waiting here won't do us any good,” Vesper says. He starts to lead the way, moving forward into the chamber, so that I must choose either to stand there alone or follow him. I do the latter, keeping my spear ready just in case.

All my caution is for nothing, though, when we reach the center of the room and I suddenly feel the presence of almost a dozen beasts around us. A familiar kind of beast: shadow cats.

A dozen of them slink from the shadows of the broken pillars, looking half-starved, snarling at us and ready to attack. They are not pouncing yet, but I get the feeling that's only because they're waiting for one of us to move, one of us to give them an opening in which to strike.

I also know that the pause won't last forever. Sooner or later, their hunger will overcome their need to wait for the perfect moment. The instant one of them attacks, I know that all of them will do so.

Vesper looks around with obvious fear at having walked into such a dangerous situation, but he looks over at me as if he expects me to solve it easily.

“You can persuade them to leave us alone, can't you?” he says.

I wish it were that easy. I wish I still had the power to do something like that. As it is, controlling one bird is pushing me to my limits.

I hold up my arm, showing him the dampener. "This is restricting me too much."

"Then I will cut it off you," Vesper offers.

It's the same offer Alaric made, and I can't accept it for the same reasons.

"If you do that I will be punished, even executed, afterwards. It's one thing that Naia cut it from me without me knowing she was going to, but for someone to do it when I've asked them to would just be open defiance."

"Then we will do this the other way," Vesper says.

I feel something touch the edges of my mind. It feels like when Ravenna is trying to control me, only different. Rather than wrapping around me and trying to push me down, to overwhelm my being, this force seems to be helping me, drawing power up from inside me, boosting the little that I have access to with the dampener.

I stare at Vesper, realizing that he has access to mind magic.

"You're like her," I say. "Like Ravenna."

Vesper looks a little annoyed. "Our powers are opposites. She can control others, belittle them, push down their consciousness until they do what she wishes. My gift is for boosting the powers of others with my mind. Like this."

He puts a hand on my shoulder. I feel power rolling through me now, easy for me to access even with the dampener in place.

With that power, I am able to reach out. I can feel the minds of the shadow cats, and I grasp them, sliding inside, taking control. I'm surprised to find that I have missed this. I have missed having this much power at my fingertips. I have been so weak and so helpless, but in this moment I am neither. I whisper to the shadow cats.

“You don't want to hunt us. Go back.”

They stand there staring at me for a moment or two, golden eyes locked onto me. One by one, they slip back into the shadows that they had come out of, disappearing from view, leaving the way clear for the two of us.

“That should be enough,” Vesper says. He lets go of my shoulder, nods to me, and then walks on through the chamber.

I stand there for a moment to try to make sense of what has just happened. I had power in the seconds when Vesper was near me, but now I can feel it draining away, leaving me as restricted as before. I realize that my control over the shadow cats will be failing, and it won't be long before they come back looking for food.

I hurry after Vesper before that happens, heading for the exit to the maze.

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The sound of the crowd hits me as I exit the maze. After its silence, the noise is almost overwhelming. Some of the crowd cheering as I appear, obviously celebrating the fact that I have survived this first trial.

Others are booing and jeering.

“Why didn't you fight them?” a voice calls out. “We didn't pay to see you tame cats!”

There are other jeers and calls on a similar theme. It's obvious not everyone there appreciates the way I succeeded. I try to imagine what it must have looked like to the watching crowd. I passed through the maze, avoiding the traps and moving cautiously. I didn't fight any of the beasts within. My only moment of combat was with Malira, and that was brief, thanks to Vesper.

Yet, others are still cheering. I try to focus on those rather than on the ones who dislike the way I've succeeded. I try to tell myself that it shouldn't matter at all how the crowd are reacting. I'm not Alaric, who lives for the reactions of the crowd and the glory to be found in the colosseum. But it does seem to make a difference to me, not least because I know it is vital to Lady Elara's plan that the crowd sees me as a hero.

I see her sitting in her box. She looks pleased, nodding my way. If this is anything like the other games in which I have participated, she will have put considerable bets on me. I have earned her a lot of money in my past few seasons.

For now, I ignore all of that, focusing on the fact that I'm still alive, on the feeling of the sun on my face. I look around and find that Vesper and I are not the first to make

it out of the maze.

Alaric is there, lounging on one of the arena walls as if he is simply enjoying the day. The crowd seem to like that. I want to run to him and throw my arms around him, grateful that he has made it through safely, but I know I can't. Whatever our relationship back at Ironhold, here it is important that I do not show too much of a connection to him. There is too much of a risk that the organizers of the games might try to use it against us. It is better to keep apart for now and simply be grateful that he appears unharmed.

I am grateful for that. I know the nature of the arena is that either of us might be hurt or killed at any moment, but I still feel as though it would tear out my heart if something were to happen to Alaric.

There are two figures near him I am much less happy to see. Vex stands there as if it is only natural that he has succeeded in the trial. He doesn't play up to the crowd the way Alaric does, but instead merely absorbs the adulation as if it is his right.

Ravenna stands not far from Alaric, deliberately close enough to him that I suspect that it is to worry me. She appears unscathed, although she is cleaning blood off her knife. She looks at me while she does it and smiles. There is a promise of pain there in that smile.

Malira is the next to emerge from the maze. The wound on her side is bleeding, but she seems to have suffered no other injuries. She glares at me and takes a step forward, before seeming to realize that out here such an attack would not be tolerated. She thrusts her weapon into the dirt instead, walking over to where Vex stands while the crowd cheers. There is no jeering when it comes to her. She has given them what they want. She has given them blood and violence.

One by one, the other gladiators emerge, or most of them at least. I have already seen

that at least one is dead in the maze, fallen for the entertainment of the crowd. It's hard to think about that, especially with how close to dying in some of the traps I came.

Time stretches on, and they come out, emerging into the sunlight, but one does not. At least not yet. Rowan is still in there, and the longer this goes on the more I'm worried for him. I'm surprised by how much worry I feel for him when he has been distant ever since we argued in the previous games. He doesn't like what I am and can do. He looks at me like an outsider.

But I still can't help feeling a thread of fear running through me at the thought that something might have happened to him. There are so many dangers in the maze, and while he is a skilled gladiator, able to manipulate the earth and sense every movement upon it near him, that doesn't make him invulnerable.

Having to stand here and wait like this is killing me. Ordinarily, in the colosseum, we fight and then we return to the spaces beneath it, but in this case we are made to wait out in full view of the watching crowds. They are still roaring their appreciation for everything that takes place within the maze, and I know I need to see what's going on. I borrow the vision of a bird again, looking down into the maze from above, trying to find Rowan.

I see him fighting the shadow cats. He is the last gladiator still standing within the maze. The others left in there are all dead or dying, creatures already feasting on their flesh. But Rowan is not dead. He is using his shield to hold the shadow cats off, attacking them with his sword, trying to clear a path through them.

One of them jumps out of his shadow at him, but it seems Rowan is ready for the move. Clearly, he has seen them fight before, perhaps when he has watched some of my bouts. He is able to reverse his sword and strike the beast down, creating enough room for him to run for the exit. Another of the cats slashes at him with its claws as

he passes, making Rowan stumble, as blood opens up on his side, but he keeps going. He does not stop.

The shadow cats are chasing him now, and the worst part is that I can hear the crowd cheering for the action. Some of them are urging him on, but I'm sure others are hoping they get to see him brought down by the pack of ravenous beasts. I will him forward, hoping against hope that he will make it. He dares a slash back at the shadow cats and that buys him a second in which to run again. He makes it to the gate at the maze and he throws himself through it.

Guards slam the iron gate behind him, closing it so the shadow cats do not get through. There must be some magic at play here because it would be easy for them to step from one shadow to another, otherwise appearing beyond the confines of the maze. Instead, they snap, snarl, and then slink back into the maze to feast on the dead.

The crowd cheers Rowan's victory in surviving. Even the ones who might have been urging the shadow cats on seem happy enough that he has escaped, although I do see a couple of people here and there in the crowd throwing down their wooden betting tokens in frustration.

Rowan stands there, blood on his torso, breathing hard. It's hard not to feel relief that he has survived, and in spite of myself, a part of me wants to go to him to make sure he's all right. I don't, the same way I didn't with Alaric. Each of us must be seen to stand alone here.

Eventually, the noise of the crowd calms down. We are all standing beneath the emperor's box, and he stands at the edge of it, looking down at us. His eyes seem to meet mine for a moment or two before passing on to the others. I don't know what to make of his interest in me, although I know that the interest of anyone that powerful is far from safe.

He starts to speak. “Citizens of Aetheria, behold! The victors in the first trial! They have survived when most would have fallen. They have shown you their power, but this is just a taste of things to come. Tomorrow they will face a new trial, even more deadly.”

He looks down at us again. “Gladiators, you have earned your rest. You have shown the twin virtues of martial prowess and magical might that Aetheria rests upon. For now, retire to the receiving rooms. There, you will be treated with honor. You have more than earned it. I'm sure there are those amongst the nobles who will wish to show you their favor for having done so well.”

He's telling us that even for these trials, we must make ourselves available to mingle with nobles. I can't understand what his intentions are with all this unless it is simply to entertain.

For now, we have survived this trial but if we're going to spend time with the nobles that is almost as perilous in its way. These are people who can do almost anything they wish with us.

What will they choose with me?

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We are relieved of our weapons as we go to the receiving area within the Colosseum. It is a large marble-walled room, filled with couches on which nobles are already lounging, hung with silken drapes, decorated with frescoes and statues. Servants stand around with jugs of wine plates filled with delicacies. I see one nobleman pluck a bunch of grapes from such a tray, looking us all over with clear interest.

The soft music of a lyre plays in the background, and the air is filled with the chatter of the nobility, dressed in their finery. None of us has had a chance to change out of our armor after the first trial so we look like something violent and barbarous by comparison.

I see the other gladiators spread out, each of us approaching the room in a different fashion. Vex moves with a haughty gaze, as if unsure that anyone is really his equal even now that he is walking among fellow nobles. Ravenna selects a couch and is quickly surrounded by admirers vying for her attention, and to be the one to take her into one of the side rooms to entertain her further. Malira stands looking fierce while a couple of nobles attempt to engage her in conversation.

“Your performance was wonderful,” one says.

“So strong,” another says. “Have you given any thought to what you will do once you make your five seasons?”

I turn my attention away from her. So long as she doesn't have a weapon she can use to try to kill me, I don't want to worry about her.

Rowan looks uncomfortable, and not just because the healers have yet to work on

him. In the other games he has always tried to avoid this part as much as possible, because it brings back too many memories of his former life, but now it seems that it is impossible for him to be anywhere else.

I go to Alaric, knowing that I can't let anyone see we're together but still wanting to be near him. In this place, people are expecting us to celebrate and to be in a good mood, so maybe they won't care if we're close. They will just put it down to the excitement of the moment.

“How was it?” I ask. “You weren’t hurt, were you?”

Alaric smiles. “Hurt? Me?”

Of course it's the arrogant version of him that's on display here. The one that could never imagine being injured during a trial. I respond even to this side of him, because he is still beautiful, but it hides his best qualities, his vulnerability, his honesty, his care.

Very briefly, the mask slips. "No, I wasn't hurt, but I was worried about you. How did you get past all the creatures? Were you able to work around your dampener?"

I nod. “A little. I also had help.”

I look across to where Vesper is standing alone. None of the nobles seem to want to engage with him. It's almost as though there's a bubble of peace and silence around him. He seems perfectly happy with that.

But there are more nobles around us now, and I know Alaric and I cannot speak openly or freely. Instead, we play the parts they expect, of gladiators grateful for the attention of those who would honor us. A small crowd of admirers is gathering around us, but I see Alaric look past them.

A woman is approaching, her dark hair shot through with grey, dressed in an elegant gown of dark silk. She has a flash of color on her shoulder, and I realize it's the same noble colors as Alaric wears pinned to his gladiatorial uniform. I realize who this must be:

His mother.

“Go to her,” I whisper to him, even as more nobles try to crowd in around us. I deliberately step in the way, taking the attention so Alaric has a chance to go to his mother, his patron.

I see him go to her, bowing formally, letting her lead him to a side room, as if she were just another noble there to get the attention of the gladiators. It means I'm alone in the middle of a crowd of them, some of them reaching out to touch my armor, as if it's good luck, some of them staring at me. It's enough to make me feel uncomfortable, but I'm not the only one.

I can see Rowan, stuck in front of a noble woman in her forties, with deep red hair, a pale green dress, and enough gold and silver ornaments on her arms to buy an interest in any gladiator she chooses. Rowan actually looks scared, and I see him touching the silvery scar on his face. I know who this is, too, and almost without thinking I head through the crowd of nobles, towards the two of them. The nobles make noises of complaint about me abandoning them but I have other priorities in this moment.

“You must be Lady Tyra,” I say, moving up beside Rowan.

She looks at me with sudden dislike. It's obvious I've interrupted something.

“Do you mind?” she says. “Rowan and I were just in the middle of a conversation. We were about to retire to one of the side rooms.”

“Somehow I doubt that's what Rowan actually wants,” I say, meeting her gaze easily.
“Do you want that, Rowan?”

Rowan shakes his head. I'm used to him being so strong, so powerful, but now he feels like a much younger and more frightened man.

“So you see,” I say. “He won't be going with you today.”

"If I pay for the time, I get the right to"

I step in closer to her. “You lost that right at the moment you cut him to make sure no one else would want him.”

“Is that how you think the world works, dear?” Lady Tyra says. “You know I could have you whipped just for confronting me like this.”

“Confronting you?” I say. “I'm just having a whispered conversation with a potential noble patron. Now that conversation is concluded. Goodbye, Lady Tyra.”

She takes a step back. I doubt I've scared her, but I suspect that she doesn't want to cause a scene here. “Very well. But Rowan, you might want to think about what I said. After all, your sisters still serve me. That service can be more or less pleasant, depending on your choices.”

She walks away, leaving me standing there with Rowan. He's shaking in a way he never would after combat.

“What was that all about?” I ask him.

“What it's always about with her: she wants to control me. She wants to be my patron. I've caught her attention again and she doesn't see why things can't pick up

exactly where they left off,” Rowan says. I see him shudder at the thought. “The worst part is that she can make this happen. She can pay to be my patron, and with the power she has over my sisters... I will have to do everything she wants.”

He sounds so vulnerable in that moment that I put a hand on his shoulder without thinking about it, trying to give him some kind of comfort. I notice eyes looking our way, the nobles clearly trying to decide what, if anything, we mean to one another.

Lady Elara is there then, moving gracefully through the crowd of nobles, who seem to move aside for her, letting her glide her way over to me.

“Ah, Lyra, there you are,” she says, moving in to take my hands in a gesture that is more familiar than usual with her. It also means that I have to take my hands off Rowan, and I suspect that's partly the point of it. “You won me a lot of money earlier. Come on, we should go celebrate.”

She pulls me towards one of the side rooms, making it all look as if she is just an excited patron, wanting to spend time with her favorite gladiator. I go with her without complaint, even though Rowan gives me a questioning look, obviously wondering if he should save me the way I saved him from Lady Tyra. He looks almost disappointed when I go with Lady Elara willingly.

She leads the way into a cool, calm space, with a couch at the center of the room. She leads me to that couch and sits with me there. With another noble, this might be the first move in some attempted seduction, but her eyes harden as she sits down.

“What do you think you were doing, making an enemy of Lady Tyra?” she asks. “If the emperor finds out, it will be bad for you.”

“That’s Rowan’s former mistress,” I explain. “I couldn't let her just-”

“You can't do anything to stop her,” Lady Elara shoots back. “That's the point , Lyra. That's how this whole system works. She's a noble, and you and... Rowan, was it? You're both not just gladiators, but slave gladiators. If she pays enough to be his noble patron, she can do more or less as she wishes with him. If he rebels against her, she can have him punished. If he tries to fight, he would be executed. That's a part of how the city works.”

“It shouldn't work like that,” I say.

She nods. “I agree with you, Lyra, but that doesn't mean things will change unless we change them. Unless we overturn the whole system. And in the meantime, you can't afford to make enemies. Even your trial today... you weren't getting the crowd on your side.”

“Should I have bled more for their amusement?” I ask. I don't know what she wants from me. It was all I could do to survive the trial today.

“You could have made someone else bleed,” Lady Elara says. She gives me a serious look. “You need to be more ruthless. Embrace the violent side of the goddess, as well as the peaceful one.”

“Who should I have attacked?” I ask. “Malira? I think I only survived that encounter because Vesper intervened.”

Lady Elara looks troubled. “You need to be careful around him too. You must not put too much trust in someone you don't know.”

“I'm just meant to trust you and your plans.”

“Those plans will change things for all of us,” she promises.

Even if she does so, she stops. The sound of booted feet comes into the room, and she rises, carefully pulling her dress from one shoulder, so that it looks as if much more has been happening in this room than a simple conversation. The rumors that Lady Elara has taken me as a lover protect our true secrets, not giving people a reason to look deeper.

Two soldiers come in, and Lady Elara glares at them.

“I believe the tradition is not to interrupt nobles when they're alone with gladiators,” she says in a sharp tone. “A few moments later and...”

She leaves the rest to their imagination.

“Apologies my lady,” one of the soldiers says, “but we have been commanded to come here by the emperor himself.” He looks over to me. “The emperor Tiberius requires your presence, Lyra Thornwind.”

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Am I about to be punished for my confrontation with Lady Tyra? The thought of that feels like ice in my veins, but still, I have no choice but to go with the guards. They don't explain why the emperor wants me, but then why would they explain anything to a simple gladiator? The emperor has summoned me, and I must go.

Fear builds within me as they lead me along. Have I put myself in danger by intervening with Lady Tyra? Is the emperor about to have me punished for it?

To my surprise they lead me out of the colosseum, walking at either side of me as we all make our way through the streets of the city. The people on the streets look at me and stare in wonder as if some great hero is walking among them.

Not everyone seems so impressed, though.

“Coward! Who wants to see you go through the whole maze without killing anything?”

A man flings a stone at me. I flinch, but one of the soldiers is there, and the stone stops in midair, deflected by some magical force. It's a reminder that, in a city filled with magic, the emperor's guards are as likely as anyone to possess it.

“Move along,” the guard commands the man who threw the stone. “Or do you want to find yourself in the arena with her? Maybe then you will hope that she’s not in a killing mood.”

“Thank you,” I say as we recommence our march.

The guard makes a face. "I didn't do it for you. I did it to keep the emperor's peace. Now get moving. He wants to see you at once."

We hurry now, heading through the streets. It's obvious where we're going because the imperial palace lies ahead, behind stone walls and surrounded by beautiful gardens, which are augmented with illusions and other magic. The water from a fountain flows in impossible shapes before it falls. Creatures with the bodies of peacocks but the heads of cats strut through the grounds. A gardener levitates a stone into place. Even with such menial tasks, magic seems to be involved.

The palace itself is a thing of wonders. It is painted and gilded, banners falling from it, decorated with the imperial insignia of a sword punching into the heart of a purple blaze of magic. The two guards walk me up the steps to it, and into a space that displays wealth beyond anything I could imagine.

There are statues on every side, busts of former emperors displayed on plinths, larger statues of heroes standing freely. The mosaics beneath my feet depict the first emperors founding the city. The furniture looks as though it has been imported from around the world, and much of it is studded with jewels.

The guards take me through the palace, upstairs, to a suite of rooms closed off from the rest with golden double doors, decorated with a battle scene. They open to reveal a large chamber within, and the emperor is seated there on a gilded couch, waiting for me. His eyes follow me as I approach him, flanked by the guards.

"It is customary to kneel in the presence of your emperor, slave," he says.

A flash of anger flickers through me. Did he bring me all the way from the Colosseum to humiliate me? The guards to either side of me look restless, as if they're only waiting for an opportunity to punish me.

So I do as the emperor commands. I fall to my knees before him, waiting to see what he will do next, and what he wants of me. My heart is beating faster with fear at the thought of the possibilities. I have heard again and again that Emperor Tiberius hates beast whisperers. Perhaps he has decided to kill me at last. I have to force myself to be still, not to rise and run, or try to escape. I know that either of those things will mean that they kill me. I hold still instead and wait.

“You guards may go,” the emperor says. That catches me by surprise. It seems to surprise the guards too, because they hesitate for just a moment. “Go, I said!”

They retreat before the power of the emperor's command, leaving the two of us alone. The emperor stands, moving around me, as if I am some precious specimen to be examined carefully.

“So, you are Lyra, the mistress of beasts.”

“That is what they call me in the arena,” I say.

“And is it untrue? You are a beast whisperer, aren't you?”

What can I say to that? I can't exactly deny it after all the things I've done in the colosseum. But at the same time, I know that admitting it will put me in greater danger. With no other options, I risk the truth anyway.

“I am,” I say.

“A thing that has been forbidden in my empire,” the emperor says. “Anyone with more than a trace of the beast speech is suspicious, dangerous. And you have far more than a trace. Do you know why I forbade it?”

“They say you had a prophecy,” I say. I don't know why he's making me go through

this. Is he just trying to see how I will react?

“The people say all kinds of things. They misunderstand the talents of myself and my family. Your talent is to control beasts. Mine is to control time.”

He moves back to the couch and picks up an apple. He tosses it into the air, and it hangs there suspended.

“I'm sure you've seen plenty of people who could do this, but they're not doing it the same way . Some can control the air enough to hold the apple like a thing immersed in amber. Others might be able to manipulate it with telekinesis. You have fought the gladiator Vex, of course. Once in the arena, once in a training bout.”

It's not a question, and it shows a strange familiarity with everything I've done. The only way the emperor could know about the training bout I had against Vex is if someone reported it to him specifically. Has he been asking after me?

“I stop the apple in time,” the emperor says. “Or rather, I slow it to the point of immobility. I could do the same with you if I wished. In case you're thinking of trying anything.”

“I'm not planning to attack you, my emperor,” I say. Is that what he thinks?

"Your emperor?" The emperor laughs. "You were born in a small fishing village that barely counts as part of my empire. You were torn from it by my people and have been forced to fight for your life. I hardly think you have any love for me, Lyra."

That hits too close to home.

"I... hate what has been done to me," I say. "I hate that I'm forced to kill again and again. And you... are you the reason I have had so many difficult bouts?"

The emperor shrugs as he sits back down on his couch. "Perhaps I have been a part of it. But I have the right to do so. I am the emperor, after all, and if I wish to test your limits, I may. I can do what I like with you. I could have you broken, if I wished. I could have you impaled on a spike on the walls."

"So why don't you?" I demand, then realize the tone I've just taken with the ruler of the empire.

The emperor smiles. "That's something I've seen in you as well. You try so hard to be meek and gentle, but there's something harder and more violent in you as well. Why don't I kill you? Because you're more interesting alive, and because my prophecy isn't quite what people think. I see flickers of the future. I know the elements that are important to it. I know a powerful beast whisperer will play a role in the events to come, although even I don't know for sure whether it's to bring me down or save us all. And because I don't know, I won't condemn you outright."

"So your persecution of the beast whisperers..."

"Let me identify the ones able to survive in spite of it."

The more he says, the less I feel I understand. There's a larger game here; I know that much from my conversations with Lady Elara. But I don't know all the details of it and I have the horrible feeling that I'm a piece in the game rather than a player of it.

The emperor stands again, moving around me. Suddenly and without warning, he grabs my wrist, holding my arm out to the side. There is a knife in his hand, pressed to my skin just above the dampener I wear.

"I keep wondering what I should do with you," he says. "I go around and around, sometimes thinking I should kill you, sometimes thinking you might be my greatest ally when you finally understand. I could open your veins now and let you bleed. I

could also cut away this... restriction on you, and give you back your full power. Perhaps I will, once you prove to me that you are of use. For all my skill, for all the things I can see, I still don't know which is the correct thing to do.”

He steps away from me, staring at me again, looking me up and down. "For now, I will do neither. You are too interesting to kill, but I can't be sure of you yet, either. Now, you should be getting back. They will be missing you in Ironhold."

He gestures for me to get to my feet. I do so, starting to back away, and then I'm frozen in place. I can still think, but I can't move. He's obviously used the same power on me that he did on the apple. He moves to me, the dagger brushing against my throat, then my lips.

“A very interesting young woman indeed. You should be careful in the next few challenges, Lyra. There are forces at play in them that I don't think you have accounted for. If you're not careful, you might not survive long enough for me to make my mind up about you, and that would be a shame. Now go.”

He lets me go, and I practically run for the door.

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I never thought I would feel safe at Ironhold, but compared to being in the emperor's chambers, it feels like the safest place in the world. I breathe a sigh of relief as the great gates close behind me, flickering torches lighting the practice areas as the gladiators continue to work.

It would be easy to forget that not all of them are taking part in the Champions Trials. Many are simply preparing for the next round of holy days and the accompanying games. A couple of them look at me with jealousy as I come in. Is that because I'm a part of the trials, or is it just because I am not having to undergo the grueling training they are at the moment?

No, I realize the reason for it is because I have been at the palace because I have been summoned by the emperor. To them that is a huge honor, rather than a terrifying ordeal. But then, they do not have powers that have been all but outlawed in the empire. They have not been told by the emperor that he is still making up his mind whether he should kill them or not.

I have, and that fact makes me shudder. I know that the rest of the trials will be hard. The emperor has told me as much. He has told me to be careful of what is to come. But what can I do to prepare? My powers are still constrained by the dampener on my wrist, and no amount of training with the spear and weighted chain will get me to the point where I can defeat some of the others hand to hand.

I need another way, and the trial of the maze showed me what that way might be. I start to go looking through the fortress, searching it until I find Vesper. He is in a relatively empty chamber, kneeling before a statue of one of the gods. Is he deep in prayer, meditation, or something else? I stand there watching him, not knowing if I

should interrupt.

“I know you're there,” he says in that soft voice of his. “Hello, Lyra.”

Of course, someone with his powers would be able to sense the presence of people around them. He stands, turning to face me.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did back in the arena,” I say.

Vesper shrugs. “It helped me as much as you. One of the downsides of my powers is that I can't really do much alone.”

“I've seen Ravenna control people,” I say. “They say she's made them fall on their own swords in the arena.”

Vesper nods, looking serious. “I imagine she could do that if she wanted. She's very dangerous, although I also suspect she puts some of those stories out herself, because she wants people afraid of her before they even fight her. The more afraid she makes people, the easier it is for her to get in.”

He says it with a note of distaste, as if he doesn't like the way Ravenna uses her powers.

“You disagree with that?” I say. “I thought you had the same powers?”

Vesper smiles slightly. “And do you have the same powers as someone who can just talk to animals? Are the powers of every kineticist or pyromancer the same?”

I take his point. Magic is variable and shifts between one person and another. An archon might have control over the full sweep of magic within their discipline, possibly within multiple disciplines, but someone with a lesser talent is likely to have

only a few things they can do. Vex can make objects fly around at will, but he cannot move himself using his magic, and he doesn't seem to be able to control other people directly. Rowan can sense the vibrations of the earth and make it unstable beneath the feet of his opponents, but he cannot raise up grand works of architecture, the way some stone shapers can. It's only natural that Vesper would have different abilities to Ravenna even if they both work with the magic of the mind.

“Sorry,” I say because he makes it sound like an insult that I've compared him to Ravenna.

He waves the apology away. “It's not important. But you must understand that Ravenna and I are very different in terms of what we can do. As I said in the maze, my gift is for raising people up and boosting their talents. I can make them feel better in themselves and remove blocks to their progress. I can boost what they can already do.”

“That's an impressive power,” I say. I've felt just how impressive. He made the difference between life and death back in the maze. Until he helped me, I couldn't control any of the shadow cats. Once he did, they all obeyed me.

Vesper shrugs. “It seems impressive, and maybe out there in the world it would be, but in here? I have a few small skills of communication and mind reading that mean I can read an opponent's movements sometimes. That gives me an edge, but mostly, what I can do doesn't help me in a fight. Not alone.”

“You need someone with you,” I say. “An ally. That's when you're strongest, right.”

“But allies are difficult,” Vesper says. “I might not be able to delve into people's thoughts the way Ravenna can, but I can still see enough to know that most of the people around here are ready to betray their allies, are just using them, are prepared to kill them if they're commanded. I came to the conclusion almost as soon as I arrived

that it was simply the way of things here.”

“But you still helped me in the maze,” I say.

Vesper shrugs. “Call it mutual interest. Or maybe... you feel different. I know you don't like the killing, not like some of them. And I can feel the power inside you, even if you're cut off from most of it. I get the feeling that you probably wouldn't betray me. I thought it was worth the risk in the maze.”

“It could be worth it through the rest of this too,” I say. “You know the Champions Trials are different from the normal games. For some of the trials, it isn't a case of killing our opponents, just surviving. We can help each other do that.”

“And what if they make us fight?”

“Then we do our best not to kill one another,” I say. “You can see my thoughts, right? You must know I mean this.”

“I can see some of them,” Vesper says. “Like I said, that's not the strongest part of my power, and... maybe it's just the dampener on your wrist, or maybe it's something inherent to beast whisperers, but you aren't the easiest person to read. Or control, I guess. Because I'm sure Ravenna would already have done that if she could.”

I think back to some of the times Ravenna has influenced me. It's undeniable that she can do so, but I've always felt as though I've been able to shrug it off eventually. Maybe I'm not completely vulnerable to her. Or maybe she just doesn't have as much power as she thinks.

I think about Vesper's power, and how much of a boost it gave me, back in the maze. That was with my dampener. If I'm ever free of it, the combination of the two of us could be formidable.

“I’ll think about it,” Vesper says. “Helping you so far has been worthwhile.”

I nod. “That’s all I’m asking. I’ll leave you to your meditations.”

I leave the chamber, ready to head back to my room. I’m surprised when Alaric is waiting out there in the corridor.

“Alaric, what are you doing here?” I ask him.

“I could ask you the same question,” he says. “I was waiting for you to return, you know. I wanted to make sure you were all right after today. They said the emperor summoned you. I thought you would need me. Instead, I find you here.”

There’s an odd note in his voice. It sounds like... jealousy.

“I just came here to talk to Vesper,” I say.

“To talk?” Alaric says. “Since when does he talk to anybody much?”

“He talks to me,” I reply.

“Is that all he does?” Alaric asks. I can hear more jealousy in his voice.

“Are you accusing me of something, Alaric?” I ask. I can barely believe I’m asking it. “I go to speak with someone, and your first thought is... what? That I’m sleeping with him?”

“I heard you offering him an alliance,” Alaric says. He takes hold of my arm. “That means something, Lyra. Just how close are you to him? If he’s using his mind powers to make you his, I’ll kill him.”

“I'm not his ,” I say. “I don't belong to anyone.”

“I'm pretty sure your patron would disagree,” Alaric says. Again, I can hear the jealousy there in his voice.

“Alaric, nothing happens between me and Lady Elara. You of all people should know that the patron gladiator relationship isn't just about that.”

“Yes, but she's hardly your mother, and she's happy enough to let the rumors fly around. And the emperor took you to his rooms, I hear.”

“Do you not trust me at all, Alaric?” I ask. “Do you not know me?”

“I'm not even sure you know yourself,” Alaric says. He glances towards the chamber Vesper is meditating in. “Just... stay away from him, Lyra.”

So now he's trying to dictate who I speak to? I shake my head. I can't deal with this right now.

“I was going to come and find you,” I say.

“Were you?”

“But now I think I need to be alone. There's another challenge tomorrow, and we both need sleep. Maybe by then you'll have stopped being so jealous, Alaric.”

I don't have time for his jealousy, and what's worse, I can't assuage it. I can't give away the nature of Vesper's powers, because that's his secret to keep. I can't tell him what really happens with Lady Elara, because that would expose the spectral covenant. All I can do is hope that he realizes how foolish he's being.

But what if he doesn't? Alaric isn't just the person I care about the most, isn't just someone whose jealousy makes pain tear through my heart. He's also one of the few allies I have in the Champions Trials. I need all the allies I can get, because tomorrow is the trial of flames.

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We process down to the colosseum, the same way we did on the first day. I'm astonished by the number of people in the streets cheering for us as we pass. Normally the processions tail off after the first day and the initial burst of excitement at seeing new gladiators.

Instead, people seem to be filling the streets with at least as much enthusiasm as yesterday. Alaric is playing up to it all as usual, seeming to enjoy being the center of attention. He has not said much to me today, as if he hopes that ignoring our argument last night will make it all go away. A young woman actually flings herself from the crowd at him, succeeding in throwing her arms around him before the guards can pull her away. He bows in her direction, and now it's my turn to feel a pang of jealousy.

Those of the others who were wounded yesterday have been healed. Rowan shows few signs of where the shadow cats clawed him beyond a fine silvery tracery on his side. As usual, he ignores the crowd, as if none of this matters.

But the more time I spend around the arena, the more I realize that this does matter. The gladiatorial games are there for the entertainment of the masses, there to persuade them that the emperor cares about them, and to distract them from their lives. As gladiators, we must win our bouts because that is a matter of life and death, but it is also about entertainment and popularity. The fighters who are seen as popular attract better patrons and get better fights.

Malira seems to be glaring at me most of the way to the colosseum. It's strange how someone I have never done anything to can seem to hate me so much, simply because of Vex allying with her. Or maybe not just because of that, because I see Ravenna

walking close to her, whispering in her ear briefly. Ravenna looks my way and smiles with a kind of fake innocence that doesn't really suit her.

I briefly wonder what would have happened if I'd gone along with the idea of being her ally. If I'd somehow never learned of her role in Naia's death, or if I'd been able to move past it. What would be happening now if I decided that Ravenna only had her remove the dampener from me for my own good? Would I be walking alongside her? Would she be whispering in my ear, trying to sow suggestions there? Would she be inviting me to make connections with the highest nobles in Aetheria? No doubt I would be caught up in one of her schemes, designed to improve her position and wealth within the empire.

Perhaps I am, anyway. One of the things that makes Ravenna so dangerous is that she is able to draw people into her plans, even if they have no intention of being part of them. I reply to her innocent look with a hard one. Ravenna makes a gesture of mock fear, moving to hide behind Malira. I know she's doing it for the benefit of the crowd. Probably this whole interaction is something she set up so they will love her more and hate me a little.

Popularity shouldn't count for anything, but in the colosseum it counts for almost everything. It determines who people are prepared to bet on and who is going to get what bouts. It is a contest around the contest, and it's not one I'm sure I have the weapons to succeed in.

When we reach the Colosseum, we are led through to the waiting areas, then out to the iron gates leading to the arena floor. There I see what has been prepared this time. Even though we were all told what this challenge would be, it is still frightening to behold. A bridge stretches out from where we are standing to a circular platform a little above the floor of the arena. The platform is surrounded by a ring of flames, no doubt conjured by Lord Darius' powers. This is where we have to fight then.

The crowd roars as we stand there waiting, just the sight of us enough to drive them wild with anticipation. I'm not sure I will ever get used to people cheering at the prospect of my blood being spilled. It's enough to start a pulsing wave of fear rising up through me as I stare at the flames. The platform has no railings or edges, simply a sheer drop down into them. Anyone falling into the flames will be severely burned, if not killed.

The emperor is waiting in his box, standing there until the cheering dies down. His eyes seem to be on me again, and a faint smile plays across his lips. The others raise their weapons in salute to him, and I do the same, lifting my spear.

"Gladiators," he says, his voice carrying around the colosseum. "You are the ones who survived the maze, but that was only the first of your challenges. As promised, today you face the flames. You and another gladiator will be sent onto the platform to stay there for a turn of the glass. The two of you will not be alone up there, because creatures of fire will attack you for as long as the challenge continues. The challenge ends either when the time runs out or one of you falls. You can fall to the creatures, or to each other. You can work together against them, or you can fight one another. What will be your path to survival?"

I look around at the other gladiators, wondering who I will be partnering with. If I am put in there with Rowan, Alaric or perhaps Vesper, then it seems likely the challenge will be a cooperative one, both of us up against whatever creatures they send. If I get Vex... then I'm sure it will be a fight to the death.

But Vex goes up first, along with Alaric, and to my surprise the two of them stand back-to-back, facing outwards, ready for any threats. The bout begins, and creatures seem to flow from the flames around the platform. I can feel them the way I feel other beasts, but these seem to be formed almost purely from fire. Alaric and Vex slash at them, cutting them down one after another. When a sword cuts through them, they seemed to burst apart in a flare of fire that makes the crowd gasp.

As Alaric and Vex fight against the elementals, the platform starts to spin slowly, making the footing underneath them less certain. It takes a moment for me to realize it, but the platform is also shrinking, contracting with every rotation so that Vex and Alaric have less space in which to fight against the elementals. Thankfully, since they are back-to-back, it doesn't seem to make any difference. They fight against the elementals, cutting them down in a seemingly ceaseless display of fire bursts as the creatures break apart. I can see the sand running out of a great timer, the last few grains falling from one bulb into the other. A gong sounds as they do so, and the flames die down, the fire elementals dissipating.

Vex and Alaric walk back across the bridge to cheers from the crowd. Alaric rubs at a few small burns. Vex's cloak is charred. Otherwise, they seem unharmed. The two of them are not natural comrades in arms, but they seem to have worked out that in this challenge it is better to work together.

"The first two gladiators have survived," the emperor says. "Let us see if the next two can do as well."

He gestures to Lord Darius and the flames spring up again, the platform slowly rotating out to its full width.

"Lyra, Malira, step forward!" the emperor commands.

I walk across the bridge, clutching my weapons tightly.

"If we work together we can do this," I whisper across at her as we cross the bridge. "I know we fought in the maze, but there's no reason to do it here."

Malira doesn't answer, but simply moves smoothly onto the platform. I move on to it as well, trying to find my footing, to understand how I will need to shift my balance. In here the heat of the flames is intense, enough to make me sweat even before the

challenge has begun. Malira is standing across from me, her wound from yesterday sealed by the healers, her massive sword held ready. There is enough hatred in her eyes that I know what she will do next.

I see the great sand timer turning over, ready to start this bout. The gong sounds again, the reverberations of it carrying around the arena. Even before they have faded, Malira throws herself forward into an attack aimed straight at me.

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Because I know the first attack is coming, I manage to avoid it, circling around the perimeter of the platform, swinging my weighted chain low at Maliria's legs. She changes direction with impossible grace, leaping over the chain and charging at me once again.

I dodge this attack as well, not wanting to get caught up in a lengthy exchange of blows where the massive size and weight of her sword can batter against my defenses. It isn't how I've been trained to fight anyway. All of my training has focused on hitting and moving, trying to keep at a distance from my opponent, trying to confuse them and eventually find an opening.

"We don't have to fight like this," I call out to her, in case it will do any good.

"But it's the quickest way to victory," she shoots back. "I kill you and this challenge is over."

She punctuates that by thrusting at me with her blade, taking a quick step to her left and then slashing in the moment afterwards. I dodge, but the sword still scores a line of blood across my stomach. The armor for the Champions Trials may be heavier than for the usual games, but it is still gladiatorial armor. It protects vital areas but leaves enough uncovered that the crowd is going to get the blood it craves.

I slash at Malira with the curved blade on the end of the chain, making her hesitate, and that's enough to let me gain some distance again. The crowd roars at the first sight of blood, and we keep going.

The first of the fire elementals detaches itself from the flames around the platform, it

comes in and I wonder for a second if I might be able to take control of it. But its mind is an empty thing. I realize this is a construct more than a beast, not a natural thing at all. I thrust my spear home into it instead, and it bursts apart in a wash of flames that feels as hot as if I had been standing out in the sun all day without respite.

Malira uses the distraction to attack me again, moving quickly, so that I am forced to just defend, without any time in which to attack in return. I take a step and almost find myself toppling from the edge of the platform. It continues to shrink by the moment as I catch my balance and keep moving.

The crowd seems to be growing impatient now, jeering as I dodge.

“Fight!” a voice screams out.

“Kill her!”

I don't know if they mean that I should kill Malira or that she should kill me. I don't think it matters much to the person shouting it.

There are fewer elementals than in the fight that featured Vex and Alaric. It's obvious that Lord Darius, or whoever is summoning them, does so only to try to keep the action going. If I stray too far from Malira, or if I play defense for too long, one leaps out of the flames at me, but mostly it's just the two of us on the platform, surrounded by the flames.

There are no beasts here for me to summon. I have already established that I cannot control the elementals, and trying to call the shadow cat would take more power than I have, even if there were any shadows here for it to work with. The circle of flames seems to dispel any meaningful shadows for it to step through.

I reach out for a bird above, borrowing some of its sight. That will at least tell me if

anything is coming up behind me and let me know where I am in relation to the edge of the platform. I duck under a sweep of Malira's blade, and I borrow more than just sight. A flicker of grace and agility flows into me, letting me avoid more of the attacks.

I dare a glance at the sand timer, trying to judge how long I have to survive here. I try to remind myself that doing so is the only objective here. If I can defend long enough, if I can just survive, then that is as good as if I defeat Malira. I keep parrying her blows, swinging my chain to keep her at bay, jabbing with my spear, trying to make sure she never has an opportunity to land a lethal attack.

Maybe if the platform were not shrinking, I might be able to do it. As it is, it seems as if there is forever still to go in the bout. My heart is hammering in my chest. My skin is pouring with sweat, so that even the haft of my spear feels slick with it and it is hard to keep a strong grip. I'm forced closer and closer to Malira.

The crowd shouts louder now, as if sensing that I am running out of places to run.

“Kill, kill, kill!” The chant seems to come from nowhere, but soon it is all-encompassing, filling the space, making it hard to concentrate even as I need to focus more to hold off Malira’s furious assault.

Another of her attacks succeeds in wounding me. It is another scratch, but it only means more blood falling onto the platform, the crowd shouting its approval at the sight of me in pain. I know I'm going to have to fight back more if I'm going to survive. I can't just stand and defend, but I'm not sure I have time to do anything else.

Forced closer to Malira, all I can do is try to match the rate of her attacks, interposing my weapons whenever I can, feeling the impact on my partial armor whenever I cannot. Even when I parry the blows, the hits are jarring. I try to counterattack, because I know if I don't I'm just going to die, but I have to turn even that movement

into another parry.

Somewhere in it all I lose the sight from the bird. I see a small shape plummet from the sky. The bird falls into the flames and is consumed. That is a fresh pain, because I know I'm responsible for it. In my desperation to survive, I have reached out in the way that Lady Elara showed me. I have taken too much from it, and in taking I have killed it.

I don't have any time to worry about the bird though. It is my own survival that is in question. I spin my chain, trying to entangle Malira's weapon, but she moves it out of the way and turns the movement into another attack. I thrust my spear towards her heart, but she deflects the blow and keeps coming.

She is relentless, and now there is so little space on the platform that we are almost forced to fight toe to toe. Malira snarls at me and pushes me, shoving me back towards the edge. I teeter on the precipice, the heat of the flames below me almost impossible to withstand. Another few inches and I will plummet into them, and I have already seen what that could do. Even if I survive somehow, I will be badly burned.

Malira smiles with savage delight at my predicament, using broad sweeps of her sword to keep me on the edge of the platform. She seems to know that if it keeps shrinking, I will be brought into range, and she can push me to my doom.

In an instant, there are three of me there on the edge, all moving, all ready to fight. I gasp as I realize that someone has thrown an illusion up over me. I look over Malira's shoulder and I see Alaric standing next to Vesper. Vesper must be boosting his power to let him send an illusion out like this to help me, when normally he can only summon illusions around himself.

The risk he is taking is immense. They are both risking a lot. If the emperor decides that they are interfering in the bout more than they should, they will face punishment

for this. They might even be executed. But still they are doing it. Multiple versions of me now line up against Malira.

She curses and charges. And in that moment, she guesses wrong. She swings her sword straight through one of the illusory copies, and that gives me the only opening I'm going to get in this fight. I shove into her, hitting her with my full weight, and she stumbles to the precipice of the platform, struggling to keep her footing even with her abilities.

Then she drops, falling into the flames with a scream that rings out even above the cries of the crowd. They roar in appreciation of the nature of the victory, even as Malira screams in pain and rolls through the flames, trying to get to safety. Healers are running to her, pulling her from the flames, but I can already see the burns covering her.

I feel sick at the sight of it, but I know if I did anything else, I would be the one there. That, or she would have killed me outright.

Even as I think it, the platform comes to a halt. I find myself looking up at the emperor's box. I can see Lord Darius up there, apparently remonstrating with the emperor. He looks furious. The emperor holds up a hand for silence. Is this the moment when he will condemn me for Alaric's interference? Will he condemn all of us?

"I declare the gladiator Lyra the victor of this bout," he says. It takes a moment for the words to sink in. He has decided I'm the winner. He says nothing about the manner of my victory.

Some in the crowd boo, but many more are cheering. Because that's the truth of the games. The crowd aren't interested in fairness, or in the niceties of the combat. In this moment they're only interested in the fact that I have pushed someone out into the

flames.

As soon as the bridge is back connected to the platform, I hurry over it. Alaric is there waiting for me.

I am grateful for that, but I'm also worried about the danger he might just have put himself in by helping me.

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Most of the healers are busy working on Malira, so Alaric takes me to the beast pits instead. Stefano is waiting for us, as if expecting that this is where I will come following such a fight. The middle-aged master of beasts uses his talent for healing, laying his hands on my wounds and sealing them with magic.

“I’m so glad you survived,” Alaric says, as soon as Stefano leaves us alone. He puts his arms around me. For all his jealousy, in moments like this he is tender.

“Thanks to you,” I say, because I know it was his illusion that saved me. “But you put yourself in danger doing it. If someone proves that you were the one who created the illusory copies... interference in the games is a serious crime.”

“If they can prove it,” Alaric says. “Everyone knows my magic extends only near me.”

“Vesper helped you,” I say.

Alaric nods. “I still don't understand what he wants with you. I still don't trust him, but he helped with this.”

“You still put yourself in immense danger. Everyone knows that creating copies of yourself is one of your favorite tricks, and if they know about the relationship between us... they might execute you for something like this Alaric, noble or not.”

The city sees the games as a holy thing. To interfere in them with magic is not just criminal, it is blasphemy.

"I couldn't let you die," Alaric says. He touches his head to mine, holding me. "And my guess is that the emperor won't go against the crowd on this. They loved the way you finished the fight. They don't care that you had help. So he won't push it further. Combine that with a lack of proof, and... it should be fine."

'Should be' doesn't sound good enough when it's a question of Alaric's life. For that, I want certainty.

"Can we stay here?" I ask him.

Alaric smiles, holding me. "For a little while. At least while the other fights last. But then you know we must go and be admired by the nobles."

I know it, but that doesn't mean I like it. Having to parade before the crowds is one thing, but having to go into the receiving room after the games each time is a different kind of attention. It is something more personal, when the nobles are close enough to touch me, and when they think they have the right to. Only the patronage of Lady Elara has kept me from them so far. They look at me and don't just see a victorious gladiator, someone to be seen with. They see a conscripted gladiator, someone without the freedom to say no to them.

So I stay there in the best pens with Alaric as long as I can. Eventually, though, the guards and the trainers come down to find us. We must go and mingle with the nobility once more. We head up through the colosseum, making our way to the receiving room, where the nobles are already admiring some of the others, making sure they are seen with them.

"When the third elemental came at me, that's when I knew I had to use all my blades at once."

Vex is standing with a collection of nobles, sipping wine with them as if he is simply

another one of them. He seems to be telling the story of his bout, although he seems to be missing out the part where Alaric was there, doing half the work.

Ravenna is there, with a young nobleman perched on the edge of the couch where she is sitting, looking at her with admiration. There are a couple of singe marks on her outfit, but nothing serious.

“She persuaded her opponent to walk off the edge,” Alaric whispers, before slipping away. This is one place where we can't be seen to be a couple. It would make things more dangerous for both of us. And, of course, ruin Alaric's dashing allure in the eyes of any watching noblewomen.

I think about the way Ravenna won her bout. It's just another reminder of how dangerous she is. Especially since she seems to be looking my way. She stands and moves over to me, ignoring the nobleman as he looks at her with pleading eyes.

“A dangerous move in your bout today,” she says. “Having someone else help you like that. I assume it was Alaric.”

“I never asked anyone to help me,” I say.

“I wonder what they would do if you were found to get outside help in the middle of a match like that? If they could prove it? Probably they would have you impaled. I'm sure the emperor would be very pleased.”

I can feel a familiar pressure on my mind. My hand flashes out, grabbing Ravenna's wrist and squeezing as hard as I can to distract her.

“I just told you that I didn't ask anyone for help,” I say. “And you know that Alaric's powers don't work for other people, just for him. If someone from the crowd chose to intervene, that wasn't something I had any choice about. Now get out of my mind.”

Ravenna looks surprised, but nods. “You should be more careful, Lyra. Your position is growing more tenuous. And every time you treat me like this, the way back becomes harder. When you realize that you need my help, I’m going to make you grovel for it.”

“Thankfully, you are not Lyra’s patron.” Lady Elara walks up to us. “Now, if you will excuse us, I wish to speak to Lyra in private.”

Ravenna bows her head, then sweeps away from us. Lady Elara gestures towards the private room that she has spoken to me in before. I go with her, and I can see Ravenna watching us. I wonder how much she saw in my mind before I instructed her to leave me alone. Even if she saw everything, would it count for much? Aetheria has its laws, but so much here seems to be about ways in which people skirt the edges of them, about power and influence.

I head into the side room with Lady Elara. She sits on the couch there, picking up some grapes and looking worried. I stand before her.

“Ravenna is right about one thing,” she says. “This is a very dangerous situation for you. Do you know that Lord Darius wanted you punished for the way your bout ended?”

“So why am I not being dragged away to be executed?” I ask. Not that I want that. Fear fills me just at the thought of it. But everybody seems to be warning me about the same thing, something I can’t stop or change. At this point, I just want to know for sure how much danger I’m in.

“Partly because I interceded,” Lady Elara says. “Partly because they can’t prove who did it. Partly because they’re not sure you knew anything. And... partly because other forms of influence and interference are so common. If you bet a large amount of money on a gladiator, it is not uncommon to poison their opponent, or arrange for

them to have substandard equipment.”

“Is there nothing honest about this place?” I ask.

The question seems to amuse Lady Elara. "The Colosseum or Aetheria? In both cases, the answer is no. They are both places of blood and magic, but what they don't tell you is that they are places of whispers and subtle influence, just as much. In this case, don't worry. The emperor declared that you obviously didn't arrange any of it. And I think he was impressed by the way you finished the fight. He seems to like it when you're ruthless.”

Her words take me back to the moment when I pushed Malira, sending her tumbling into the flames. I can still hear her screams, still smell the scent of scorched flesh, lingering in my nose and throat as if I will never be free of it.

“That was just... it was the only way not to die,” I say.

“You did what you had to do,” Lady Elara says. “Just as you did when you took from the bird.”

She looks me straight in the eyes as she says that. I realize that she knows exactly what I did in my fight, the way I borrowed speed and agility from the bird above. The fact that it died for it.

I almost feel worse about doing that than I do about pushing Malira. The creature died while Malira is with the healers and will probably survive. More than that, she was actively trying to kill me, and the bird was just an innocent creature in the wrong place.

“I didn't want to kill it,” I say.

"But you also didn't want to die," Lady Elara replies. "Remember that, Lyra. Remember that we must do what is necessary for our survival and for victory."

Is she talking about my fights now, or about whatever treason she is plotting with the spectral covenant? I do not dare ask her because I suspect this place is not entirely private. The wrong words overheard could see us both impaled on spikes.

She rises, taking my hands. "You are growing in power. And that last bout has helped your popularity. You need to be popular. You need the crowds to love you. But at the same time, power and popularity will make you enemies amongst some people. It will mean more money is being bet on you. It means more people have a reason to interfere in your fights, especially now that they've seen it is possible. And the emperor... what did he speak about when he talked to you?"

"He called me interesting," I say. "He said he didn't know whether to kill me or whether I was going to save people. He froze me in place without even trying."

"He is very dangerous," Lady Elara agrees. "But you have your own power."

"Power I'm cut off from," I remind her.

Lady Elara nods. "You will have it when you need it, though. For now, concentrate on getting through this. Do whatever you have to do, especially tomorrow."

I know what she means. Tomorrow is a straight-ahead bout against one of the others. The emperor will decide whether there is mercy in the bout, and with me... he will make me kill if he can.

“She cheated.”

There are whispers when I return to Ironhold. Seemingly down every corridor, there is someone relaying the news. So few of the gladiators are involved in the Champions Trials that they are eager for any information related to them. And right now, there's only one piece of information people are talking about.

“She had Alaric help her.”

I try not to react to those whispers. I know there's nothing I can do, not without starting a fight. Am I to become like Alaric, challenging anyone who insults my honor? And in any case, the rumors are correct, more or less. I didn't say anything to Ravenna that wasn't the truth. My hope is that, if she got anything from me it was simply the sense that I was being accurate with what I said. I did not ask for Alaric's help.

But I am grateful for it. A part of me wants to go to his room tonight, just to be with him, but I know that will only fuel the rumors. We need to stay apart for now, to give the whispering time to die down.

So I head to the bathhouse, washing off the dirt and the blood of the day. I go over my fights so far in my head, trying to work out what I can learn from them. It's obvious I still have some power even with the dampener that is on my arm even now. It's just as obvious that I must lean more on physical abilities than on my magic in the bouts to come.

Lady Elara's words go around and around in my head. She wants me to be more

ruthless, to embody the goddess as huntress more. I know it will play into whatever she's doing within the city. It will help to make me more popular with the crowds. It will show the emperor that I am willing to embrace the bloody ethos of Aetheria. It will help to keep me alive.

But I also know that tomorrow, when I fight someone in a straight-ahead bout, I have no wish to kill anyone. I would normally try to simply incapacitate a foe if I can. But if the emperor's the one who decides mercy, I might not even be able to avoid their deaths then.

What if I'm made to face Alaric? That prospect is almost too horrifying to contemplate. Just the thought of it is as if my heart is being torn out of my chest.

I leave the bathhouse and go to the main dining hall of the fortress. The other gladiators have mostly eaten, but there is enough bread and stew left over for me. I'm still eating it when Lord Darius walks in. He does not look happy.

"The bouts today were marred by cheating and interference," he says. He looks straight at me as he says it, and fear starts to rise up in me. Has he decided to punish me anyway for what happened, even though Lady Elara assured me that she had interceded on my behalf? "In the old days, anyone doing that would have quickly found themselves sacrificed to appease the gods for their transgression. Now, though, it seems the emperor is inclined to be lenient."

He looks as though he thinks that is a mistake.

"But let us be clear: the emperor's lenience does not mean that such things are suddenly allowed, merely that it is impossible to say for sure who the perpetrator in this case was. Greater precautions will be taken going forward."

I breathe a sigh of relief because it seems they aren't going to do anything to me.

“Now for the part that matters,” Lord Darius says. “The matchups for tomorrow.”

He goes to the great chalkboard at the front of the room.

"In these bouts you will be fighting one-on-one, although the arena will have been altered to make things more interesting. The bout will continue until one of you falls. At that point, the emperor will decide whether to be merciful. The emperor will decide, not you."

He looks at me again. Lord Darius's belief in the traditions of the games presumably does not sit well with the fact that I showed mercy to Vex in my first season, against the commands of the emperor.

“And if someone refuses to finish their opponent?” Ravenna asks. It's strange that it's coming from her, but it is a question I want an answer to.

“Then executioners will be sent in to finish the opponent for them. Slowly. And they will die alongside their foe.” Lord Darius seems to relish those words, still looking at me, knowing the situation he has just put me in.

He knows I don't want to have to kill if I can avoid it. Now he has created a situation in which I cannot avoid it.

He goes to the board, writing the matchups. I watch the names written up there with trepidation. I see Alaric paired against Malira. Will she even be recovered enough to fight? Her name is up there, so she must believe that she can keep going. I stare, waiting to see who I will be paired against.

When I see the name, it is worse than I could have imagined. Rowan's name is there, opposite mine. I am to fight him, when he has been so close to me, when he has helped me so much. When we have meant so much to each other.

I feel sick at the sight of it. I can't believe someone has done this. I have no doubt that it's deliberate. There are still enough of us in the Champions Trials that I could easily have been paired against someone else. More than that, it wouldn't normally seem like an interesting bout to the organizers of the games. Rowan is much larger and stronger than me, and he has tended to get the better of me in our training bouts in the past. With my full abilities, maybe I could summon a creature to help bring him down, but as I am at the moment?

Perhaps the organizers have decided that they do not need to execute me. They can simply give me about I cannot, will not, win. Because how am I meant to bring myself to hurt or kill Rowan? Such a thing is unthinkable, except that where we are demands I think about it.

This is what the games are, what they have been from the start. We are pitted against one another, and death is always a possibility. This bout merely makes it much more likely. Almost a certainty.

With other bouts, I'm sure the emperor will show mercy. The noble gladiators will almost certainly get it, although my first fight against Vex shows that it is not guaranteed even for them. Those gladiators who put on a good show will probably survive because the crowd will want to see them again.

But in my bout?

I know the emperor wants to see the limits of what I can do. More than that, he wants to see what I will do. He wants me to be the kind of killer he can make use of in the service of the empire, or maybe he just wants to be proved right about beast whisperers being vicious and deadly.

I look around for Rowan in the dining hall. He is standing there, staring at the board. I cannot read the expression on his face because it seems that he's keeping it carefully

blank. He doesn't even look my way, although I get the feeling he knows exactly where I am. He turns and leaves the dining hall, heading deeper into the complex of Ironhold, is it not wanting to face the reality of this.

I set off after him, moving quickly along the corridors, trying to follow. He is out of sight, but I'm able to use my powers to pick up his presence using the sense of smell of a rat, the eyes of a bird. I must use them carefully, leaving them without taking anything from them. Rowan is heading deeper into the noble sections of the fortress.

I follow, but instead of Rowan, I find Ravenna blocking my path.

"Now, what are you doing up here? This isn't where you belong. Unless you're going to see dear Alaric."

"Get out of my way, Ravenna," I say.

She smiles cruelly. "How do you like having to fight Rowan? I thought about making it Alaric, but I think he might actually refuse to kill you, he loves you that much. Whereas you set Rowan aside. Besides, this brings in some additional layers of pain for you. Because you're feeling so much about the man you used to care about, but can you admit that pain to Alaric? It will make him so deliciously jealous. I wonder which of you will kill the other tomorrow?"

"You're saying that you made this happen?" I say.

"Me?" Ravenna says, with a look of mock innocence. "How could I make anything like this happen? Lord Darius and Lady Selene decide this sort of thing, not me. At least, that's what everyone thinks. Now go away, Lyra. Go tell Alaric everything. I'm sure you'll just break your heart and his in the most beautiful way."

I move past her, but it's an effort of will not to strike her as I do so. I'm still looking

for Rowan, but it seems he's disappeared deeper into the fortress now, and the determination with which he's doing it suggests that he really doesn't want to talk about any of this. Maybe he can't. Maybe he knows that, since he will have to kill me tomorrow, he needs to keep his mind clear of all thoughts of caring about me.

The full horror of what I'm being forced to do hasn't hit me yet, but I know it will. I'm already feeling waves of pain and anger at being forced to fight like this, are being put in a position where I may have to kill someone close to me.

And Ravenna seems to have arranged it somehow. At least, that's what she's hinting at. How could she have done it? Some favor called in? No, I doubt that. Lord Darius is clear that the games matter to him. He wouldn't be so corrupt as to change the bouts at someone's request.

Unless Ravenna was able to use her powers on him. Could that be it? Her mastery of mind magic is undeniable. Could she be using it to arrange the bouts? Could she be the reason I must fight Rowan?

I don't know, but I do know I need help thinking all of this through. Ravenna is right about one thing: I need to talk to Alaric.

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I find Alaric in the space within the noble section of Ironhold given over to a combination of temple and gallery space. It is a large, vaulted room, filled with statues of the gladiators who have gone before, along with semi mythical figures who represent heroes or gods connected to Aetheria's past.

He is kneeling before a statue as if in prayer. He touches his fingers to the statue, then to his lips as he stands, turning to face me. It's obvious that he can see the pain on my face because he reacts to it instantly, moving to me and taking me in his arms.

My lips find his, seeking wordless comfort in that moment of physical connection. We melt into each other for several seconds. Is this what I want now? For him to take me back to his rooms and make me forget all about what is to come tomorrow?

"They're making me fight Rowan," I say, when we finally pull apart.

"I know," Alaric replies. "I saw."

When my voice is filled with pain, his is flat and without emotion. Or perhaps he's hiding whatever he is really feeling.

"I know you don't like Rowan," I say.

"What I don't like is that you're feeling this much pain at the prospect of fighting him. He's just another gladiator. Isn't he?"

There's a challenge in that question, a hint of jealousy again that seems to question any connection I have with others.

“He's my friend,” I say. “And he isn't someone I just want to kill.”

“Is he someone you're prepared to give up your life not to kill?” Alaric counters. “Because that's what it means, Lyra. You heard Darius back there. If you refuse to kill someone, you won't save them. You'll just find yourself executed alongside them. So the only real way to guarantee that you would save him would be for you to let him kill you. Does Rowan mean that much to you?”

I hesitate, and Alaric clearly doesn't like that hesitation.

“The answer is meant to be obvious, Lyra,” he says. “Rowan isn't meant to mean that much to you. Even I shouldn't mean that much to you, although this is the level of agonizing about the question that I would expect if the two of us were meant to fight.”

He holds me at arm's length now, looking deep into my eyes.

“Do you love Rowan?”

I shake my head. The answer to the question is actually complicated, but I don't think Alaric wants complicated right now. He doesn't want to hear that feelings don't just go away. That, even though Rowan pushed me away because he couldn't handle what I was or my attitude to the games, that doesn't mean I just feel nothing now. It isn't the same as what I feel for Alaric, but it's something, and in any case, I'm not sure I like this jealous side of Alaric. There's something possessive about him, as if he's scared of the possibility that I might leave him.

“Then you need to be ready to do what's required,” he says. He puts a finger to my lips to stop me saying the next part. “I know he's your friend, I know you care about him, but that's not a luxury we have here. We do what we must. Do you think he isn't getting ready to kill you?”

“I honestly don't know,” I say. I saw him walking away. It's obvious he doesn't want to speak to me, and is the reason for that because he knows that if he does speak to me too much he won't be able to bring himself to do what he needs? Is he staying clear of me because he knows he will kill me in the morning?

“Lyra, you must promise me you will do whatever it takes to survive tomorrow,” Alaric says. He kisses me again, then talks softly against my lips, barely above a murmur. “I risked everything to save you today, and I would do it again in a heartbeat, but tomorrow I won't have that option. You must be the one to save yourself. If you must kill him to come back to me, I want you to promise that you'll do it.”

I know he's saying it because of how much he cares about me, but I'm not sure I can promise to kill so easily.

“I... I'll do everything I can to survive,” I say instead.

Alaric can hear my hesitation, but he seems to know he's not going to get anything more from me. Instead, he leads me from the gallery space back in the direction of his rooms.

“If there's a chance we might lose one another tomorrow, I want to make the most of this last night.”

That, at least, is an idea I can fully agree with.

In the morning, our procession sets off for the city. Malira is on a cart, wrapped up tightly in a cloak. She seems so injured that she will not be able to fight. I'm grateful for that, because it should mean Alaric goes through without having to take any risks.

Rowan is marching along with the rest of us, his expression set, his eyes looking straight ahead. I try to move over to him but the moment he sees me doing it he does the one thing he normally never does and engages with the crowds, talking to them as he goes. It means there is no chance of me being able to speak to him, and I'm sure that's a deliberate ploy. He barely looks my way. Is there a flicker of pain there as he glances at me? Is that the expression of someone who knows he's going to have to kill me if he's going to survive?

In moments like this I hate the colosseum. I hate Aetheria and its games. I hate that it is all founded on blood and death, on people being forced to kill one another for the entertainment of the crowd.

In moments like this, I could tear it all down.

My mood does not brighten as the Colosseum comes into view. Every step now feels like one more pace along the route to an execution. For the first time since the early days after my capture, I wonder about the possibility of escaping. But there are too many people around us. Not just the guards; the crowd would not allow me to flee. They would not allow themselves to be cheated of their entertainment.

So, I follow the rest of them, heading into the colosseum. This time I see it has been reworked with stone platforms, forming a kind of three-dimensional structure over which gladiators might climb. It is reminiscent of some ancient temple, complete with crumbling stones and several obvious dangers. A sharpened pendulum swings back and forth in one spot. Spears thrust up through the floor in another. It's remarkable, really, that the arena could have been so completely transformed in the space of one night.

I see the nobles there in their boxes. Lady Elara is there, and I gesture to her, frantically, hoping that she will see in the moments before we're all led beneath the arena.

The minutes stretch out. We're all kept separate now to prevent any collusion or interference. Somewhere in those minutes a knock comes at the door, and Lady Elara steps inside looking worried.

"Lyra, what is it? We don't have long. Even as your patron, the guards don't like me down here before your fight."

"I think Ravenna might be influencing the selection of the bouts and the kind of contests that are taking place," I say. "They're forcing me to fight Rowan. Can you go to the emperor and persuade him?"

"Persuade him with what?" Lady Elara asks. "Do you have proof of this?"

I shake my head.

"Then I won't be able to change his mind. It will just look as though I'm trying to get a more favorable bout for my gladiator. And... I think you might be wrong about this, anyway."

"She all but said that she did it," I say, wanting Lady Elara to understand.

"Well, maybe she gets some advantage from you thinking that," Lady Elara suggests. "Think about it, Lyra. To influence the selection of the bouts, she would need to use her powers on Lord Darius, probably while Selene Ravenscroft is around to watch for unauthorized magic use. Do you think the arch magistrate wouldn't spot the attempt in an instant?"

Selene Ravenscroft is the most powerful magic user I've seen, with the subtle control over her powers that marks her as someone of archon strength. Lord Darius might not have her strength, but he has his background as a gladiator to draw on, and presumably he knows how to protect himself from mental assaults.

I know all of that, but still I can't help thinking that Ravenna is involved somehow.

"Even if she could do it," Lady Elara says. "It would be a terrible risk for her. The only reason you're not on an impaling spike right now is that no one was able to prove who helped you. If anyone were to work out that she was influencing the organizers, her death would probably not be nearly as quick. This wouldn't just be interference in a bout, it would also be a magical attack on a pair of respected nobles, controlling the minds of Lord Darius and Lady Selene."

I understand what she's saying but still, Ravenna sounded too confident about her capacity to influence things. I want to ask Lady Elara to look deeper, but in that moment the guards and the trainers come for me.

"Stop all this," the trainer says. "The time for talking is done. You must come with us, now ."

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“I give you Lyra!”

The crowd cheers as I step out into the sunlight, moving to one end of the crumbling temple complex that has been built in the arena. I clutch my weapons tightly, gazing out over the expanse of it, looking at all the possible routes through. I raise my spear in acknowledgement of the cheering, knowing that I need the crowd to respond, that I need them to like me.

There is still a chance that if Rowan and I put on a good enough show, we will not be forced to kill one another. If the crowd are cheering our names, if they want to see more of us, the pressure of their chanting and cheering might be enough to sway the emperor.

It's not much of a plan. It's a desperate last hope. But it's also the best option I have. So I stand there, trying to pretend to be the gladiator they want me to be. And as I do so, the Emperor speaks again.

“And her opponent, the master of the earth, will he be able to crush Lyra with his strength? It's Rowan!”

The crowd cheer for him as well, and I'm surprised that the cheers for me seem to have been louder. Even as some start chanting Rowan's name, there are more people chanting mine.

The emperor stands waiting, letting it all grow to a crescendo, then holds up his hands for silence. In that silence, he speaks.

"Gladiators, before you, is a complex filled with deadly traps and pitfalls. You must find one another within it. You must fight. You must defeat your foe if you can. I am the only one who can grant mercy here. Begin!"

A horn blares to signal the start of the bout, and I start to clamber over the ruins, making my way towards Rowan.

He does not come at me directly, but instead circles around the perimeter, as if he is determined to avoid me, or perhaps as if he wishes to make sure that he has an advantageous position before the battle commences in earnest. This is an environment that should give him an advantage. There are no beasts here for me to connect with other than the carrion birds, whereas the whole of this temple is made from stone.

Is Rowan just avoiding me because he wants to put off the moment when he must kill me?

That feels like the very opposite of what we should be doing. Our only chance of both of us surviving this is if we can put on a show to impress the watching crowds. If we can impress the emperor so much that he wants us both to live.

I move through the temple, trying to catch up to Rowan, determined to come to grips with him, so that the crowd can get the violence it wants. Even as I do so, a blade jumps up out of the stone at me, a trap triggered by a pressure plate in the floor. I'm barely quick enough to knock it aside and keep moving.

"Fight me, Rowan!" I call out to him. To the crowd it must sound as though I'm taunting him, but I hope he will understand what I intend. "Let's give these people the fight they deserve to see."

Rowan is still moving cautiously around the temple complex built within the arena, however, as if he is trying to learn every nuance of it before he has to fight. I borrow

the eyes of a raven above, looking down and using that view to navigate. It means I can sidestep a pitfall, recognizing it for what it is before I put my foot on it. I jab it with my spear so that it collapses, giving the crowd that much spectacle at least.

What must this look like to them? The raven's perspective gives me some sense of it, because I can see myself stalking after Rowan like a huntress closing in on her prey. I think of what Lady Elara has said, that I need to embrace that side of the goddess Deira. That I must hunt and kill as well as seek peace for the creatures around me.

Is she pleased with this? Is the emperor?

The crowd does not seem to be pleased, perhaps because Rowan is still avoiding me, still skirting around the edges of this complex, even as I close in on him. My view from above allows me to find a route across it that lets me decrease the distance between us, but Rowan is still dodging, still circling. And now the crowd is booing. They want action. They want blood.

"Fight me, Rowan!" I call out to him again.

I close the distance enough that I'm able to swing my chain at him. Rowan blocks it with his shield, still moving away and refusing to engage.

"You won't make me kill you, Lyra," he calls back.

Is that what he thinks this is? Does he think that I'm attacking because I know only one of us can survive, and I want to provoke him into killing me quickly? Does he really believe I'm just giving up my life like that? And if so, why isn't he accepting the offer? There are plenty of others who would rush to engage me if they thought I was in a hurry to die at their hands.

Rowan is not one of them, despite what Lord Darius told us would happen if we

refused to kill one another. He's still keeping his distance.

I charge at him, not knowing what else to do. I thrust my spear his way, then close with him briefly, the haft of the weapon pushing his shield while my chain tangles and deflects his sword.

“Listen to me,” I whisper sharply. “The only way we both get to live is if they like what we're doing. If we give them a heroic battle, then when you beat me, the emperor will want to see more.”

“You're wrong,” Rowan shoots back. “There won't be any mercy.”

“Not if you keep refusing to fight,” I say, but he shoves me with his shield, forcing me back so that he can go back to keeping the distance and circling.

I attack him furiously because it's the only way I can give the impression that we're having a real battle. Rowan deflects my attacks with his shield and with his sword, because if he doesn't he will be hurt by them. I'm not aiming for vital areas, but I'm at least trying to get a response from him.

If I hope that this will be enough to satisfy the crowd, I'm sorely mistaken.

"Kill him! Kill him!" they begin to chant, while others continue their chorus of boos. It's obvious they can tell the difference between two fighters who are actively trying to kill one another and two who are merely engaged in some kind of elaborate dance, with only one of them making any real effort to attack.

The emperor's voice rings out over the arena. “I will give you both one turn of the sand to bring this fight to a conclusion. If it is not finished by then, both of your lives will be forfeit!”

Fresh terror runs through me. Now we don't even have time in which to work out a way through this situation. I have no more time in which to persuade Rowan to work with me. He seems to be making a decision as well, standing back and thinking for a moment.

Then he attacks for the first time in this bout. His sword swings at me, and I barely block it in time. His shield batters me, pushing me back. Now we are exchanging blows, my spear slicing around so that he must jump over it, my weighted chain slamming against his shield.

Rowan attacks, hitting me with his shield, forcing me to defend against his sword. I must give ground, stepping across the crumbling stone surfaces of the fake temple. The crowd are cheering more now, as if realizing that the action is finally hitting up. Rowan pushes me this way and that, using his shield to direct me, his greater strength meaning that I must go with the movements because I have no chance of holding my ground without leaving an opening for his sword. We fight, and Rowan is the one in control of where the fight takes place. Arrows flash past us, triggered as a part of some trap. Stones crumble on the edge of a walkway as Rowan forces me back along it. We are heading for a stone platform that looks unstable, the edges of it already crumbling. If Rowan forces me onto that and it gives way, the way it is designed to, I will fall and be crushed by the weight of rocks following me.

“Rowan, wait,” I say.

“I'm sorry, Lyra. I have no choice.”

He lunges at me, sword raised, shield in front of him to prevent my spear from finding a home in his torso. Not that I can bring myself to thrust it home anyway. Rowan charges in...

... and then, at the last moment, he spins the two of us around and pushes away from

me, making it look as though I've shoved him. He stumbles back onto the platform. He stands there for a moment, and I know that if he tried, he could stabilize it long enough with his powers to leap clear. Instead, he stands there, sword raised.

The platform gives way. Rowan falls with a cry, disappearing in a shower of stone and dust. More stone falls from above, rocks tumbling down onto his falling form. The noise of it is awful, and when it's settled, Rowan is nowhere to be seen. He is buried by a pile of rocks so large that no one could survive such a thing.

There is silence for several seconds, then the crowd erupts in cheers. Tears fall down my cheeks, even as I lift my spear in automatic acknowledgement. How could Rowan do this? How could he give his life for me like this? My heart aches with the agony of what has just happened. I feel numb, the outside world barely touching me at all. When the announcer speaks, the words seem to come from a distance.

“Citizens of Aetheria, I give you your victor, Lyra!”

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My victory tastes like ashes in my mouth. Rowan is dead. I cannot see his body, but he is buried under so much rock that no one could have survived it. Even the fall was far enough that it might have proved deadly. A part of me hopes that it did, because at least that would have been quick.

Anguish balls up in me like a fist clenched around my heart. I reach inside for power, pain making me want to lash out, but the dampener around my wrist prevents me from doing anything.

I cannot breathe. I cannot think. I can barely see through the tears that cloud my eyes. I have already saluted the crowd, but I stand there, spear raised, for so long that it feels that someone must come and make me leave. And if they do maybe I will strike at them with that spear, because the guards and the trainers and the rest are all part of the system that has brought about Rowan's death. If I hated all of this before I loathe it now.

Somehow, I bring myself to stagger down from the temple ruins that they have crafted in mockery of the actual structures of the gods. I head for the iron gates, and they open for me to let me back into the depths beneath the arena. Alaric is there waiting for me, and for once, he does not play the part of the aloof and arrogant noble in public. He simply takes me by the arm, leading me back inside.

“I know it hurts, Lyra, having to kill a friend,” he says.

“But I didn't kill him,” I say. “Rowan did that deliberately. He could have shoved me onto the deadfall. I could have been the one buried under all that rock. I should have been.”

Alaric grabs me by the shoulders then, holding me there and giving me a serious look. "Do not talk like that. Don't even think like that. The whole point of this was that one of you had to die so the other could survive. If it's you who has survived... I'm grateful for that. You should be, too."

I know what he's saying, but I don't feel glad to be alive right now. Instead, I just feel guilty that Rowan has died so that I might live.

"He chose this," Alaric says. "You said it yourself, he pushed himself into position for this to happen. Rowan allowed himself to be killed so that you can live."

That doesn't make me feel any better. If anything, it makes me feel worse, because if it had been someone other than Rowan, they would not have done this. Only the fact that he cared enough about me led him to do this, and that is a fresh pain because it proves just how much he felt for me, even if he pulled back from me after he found out the extent of my powers.

"Lyra, listen to me," Alaric says. His hands touch my face, so gentle and so sure. "You can grieve. You can do what you need to do but only for today. Tomorrow you will have to fight again, and if you're so weighed down with grief that you can't do anything, then Rowan's sacrifice will be for nothing."

"How can you be so cold about this?" I demand. "I know you hated him, but you can't just tell me not to feel anything!"

"It's not about what you feel," Alaric insists. "It's about survival. Rowan has given you a chance. You owe it to him to take it, and you owe it to me to live through these trials. Everything you're feeling now, I will feel ten times worse if you do not make it. Please, Lyra."

My emotions roil inside me. I don't know what to think or to feel, and even as I'm

trying to decide, a sound comes from the arena. There is a kind of gasp from the crowd, followed by sounds of disapproval, and a cry of pain that is in a voice that I recognize only too well.

“Rowan!” I exclaim.

Confusion reigns in me, and I rush to the iron gates, wanting to see what is going on. It takes me a few seconds to make sense of it all. Rowan is being pulled from the rubble of the deadfall. Healers are dragging him onto a crude stretcher to carry him.

I gasp at the impossibility of it all. Somehow, Rowan has managed to survive. I'm still crying, but now the tears are tears of joy. All of the grief that was in me releases all at once and I feel as though I might collapse. Rowan makes another sound of pain, and even though I can't stand to hear that, it is proof that he is alive.

My hand goes to the gates. I want to rush out there to him. I want to go to him.

Alaric grabs me, holding me back.

“Let me go!” I insist. “I must go to him.”

There is hurt on Alaric's face, but also determination. I guess it was easy for him to forgive my feelings for Rowan when he thought that Rowan was gone. Now, the fact that I care enough about Rowan to want to run to him must be like a slap in the face. Still, he holds on to me.

“Think about it, Lyra,” he snaps. “You can't go out there.”

“What do you mean?” I demand. “I need to. And they can't stop me. I was involved in that fight too!”

"That's my point," Alaric says. "You have been declared the victor of this fight. At the moment, that still stands. You haven't done anything wrong. But if you go out there, what's to stop the emperor from demanding that you finish Rowan?"

It takes a second for the full horror of that thought to hit me.

"He wouldn't," I begin, but I know it's false even as I say it.

"Of course he would," Alaric retorts. His eyes narrow. "We both know the emperor has been targeting you. Well, someone has, and he's the best placed to do it. The whole point of his little speech at the start was that he was going to get to make you kill someone, or watch you be killed. He still hasn't forgiven your refusal to kill Vex. If you go back out there, he will make you kill Rowan."

And he's already set out the penalty for failing to do it. I could go out there and refuse, but that would just mean that we both get executed.

"Rowan has tried to cheat the system here," Alaric says. "That, or he just got incredibly lucky. Either way, if the emperor sees a way to force things to end the way he intended, he'll take it. You can't go out there. I won't lose you like that."

He holds on to me, making sure that I can't leave, but he has already convinced me. As hard as it is to stand here and wait, I must do it. I stand, not moving a muscle, waiting and hoping as the healers drag Rowan back into the space beneath the arena.

The moment he is through the gates, out of the emperor's view, then I run to him.

"Why did you do that?" I demand, looking down at him as he lies on the stretcher. "How did you even survive?"

"I knew it was the only chance we had to both survive," Rowan says. "Your idea of

putting on a good enough show wasn't going to work. There was no way the emperor wasn't going to see someone die in your fight. So I gave him what he wanted, or at least the impression of it.”

“How?” I say. “I saw you fall. I saw you crushed.”

“By stone,” Rowan says, then winces in pain. “I have control over stone. I was willing to bet that I could have enough to keep myself alive. I was able to keep it from crushing me and maintain enough space to be able to breathe.”

“But you're injured,” I say.

Rowan’s face shows his pain again, and the sight of that makes my heart ache in sympathy.

“This wasn't the stone. This was the fall.”

“And that fall has broken your leg,” one of the healers says. “A bad break. We need to get you onto our slab to start to work on it. Even then, I doubt you'll be able to take part in the rest of the games.”

Rowan’s wince then has nothing to do with pain. He has ruled himself out from the rest of the games to save me. To stop me from having to kill him. He has kept us both alive, but at what cost?

In previous games, it would have been simple. Our friend Naia had more skill with healing than anyone I have seen. But she is dead now, killed by Vex. It won't be so simple to undo the damage that Rowan has done to himself here.

I am grateful to him, and more than that. In the moments when I thought he was dead, the pain I felt for him wasn't just that of a friend. It is confusing and difficult, and one

look at Alaric's expression says that he sees all of it.

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“How did you arrange it?”

Ravenna is the one to ask the question, down beneath the colosseum, as she comes back from her bout.

The bout was short because her opponent wasn't strong enough to ward off the powers that she used against him. It didn't take her long to lure him to the edge of one of the higher points of the temple. She placed a kiss on his lips and then pushed him backwards, to fall.

Even then the bout wasn't done, because her foe was injured not killed. I had to watch as Ravenna walked down almost casually, giving the emperor a look and waiting for his decision.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” The chanting of the crowd was almost at fever pitch as the emperor held out his hand, thumb down to signal death.

Ravenna didn't hesitate, just drew her dagger across her opponent's throat. I find myself wondering if the battle would have gone the same way if Rowan hadn't cheated death. Is the emperor taking out his anger on the other gladiators who lose now?

“Arrange what?” I counter.

I wish Alaric were here to back me up, but he has gone to start his preparations for his bout. He will be fighting soon. It will be his turn, and noble or not, there is not likely to be much mercy out there if he fails.

I can see the other gladiators who are not preparing for their bouts looking over at me with suspicion. Even the ones who are not my enemies seem to be unhappy with me.

“Oh, there's no need to be coy,” Ravenna says. “It was obvious throughout your fight that neither of you was really trying to kill the other, were you?”

I can't tell her the truth about that, which is that she's right, just not for the reason she's insinuating.

“I don't answer to you, Ravenna,” I snap back at her.

“And then there's the interference in your bout over the flames,” Ravenna says. “It seems you're determined to get through this without ever having an honest fight.”

“And what would you know about that?” I demand, confronting her. “All you do is manipulate people and mess with their minds.”

Ravenna smiles. It's easy to forget just how beautiful she is, how deep it's possible to fall into her eyes.

“Wouldn't this conversation work better if you were on your knees, Lyra?” She whispers, and of course she's right. How could she be anything but right? Ravenna is the most beautiful and powerful of all of us, so naturally, I fall to my knees.

“That's enough,” one of the trainers snaps, and Ravenna's spell over me breaks.

She smiles again. “Just a reminder that you're not immune to what I can do. It's not a parlor trick. And if we face one another out there, you will kneel happily while I cut your throat. Won't you?”

“Yes,” I say, before I can stop myself.

The other gladiators there laugh at that. Ravenna has proved her point about how powerful she is. She has also stopped me from refuting any of her allegations about me and Rowan. I'm sure that everyone there thinks now that we arranged the whole bout between us, that we rehearsed every step of it.

I have no doubt, as I get back to my feet, that the match between us looked bad. Rowan refused to engage for so much of it that even my attempts to attack him looked fake. I was throwing myself forward at him, and he wasn't replying with attacks for much of the fight.

“I wonder how many people are asking for their coin back on that fight?” Ravenna asks. “I wonder how much they will hate you for it, for costing them money?”

I wince because I know she's right. Betting is a huge part of the arena. People love to place their coin on their favorite gladiators, and hope that they succeed, or to bet against those they think are weak. The outcome of this bout might displease almost everyone. The sensible gamblers who know about us will have put their money on Rowan, because he is simply stronger than me, at least with my powers restricted. Even those who bet on me for reasons of sentiment or because they thought I would find a way to win might not be happy now, because there's a chance the bookmakers will refuse to pay out on a bout that looks so obviously fixed.

“Who did you put your money on, Ravenna?” I ask. I know that she likes to make money on the games. She likes the way her manipulations can build wealth and power for her, even from within the walls of Ironhold. “Who did you tell your noble friends to back?”

She smiles again. “I already made my money. Did you know that you can bet on what the matchups will be? People think they know the minds of the organizers.”

And she does. Again, I can't shake the feeling that she has some kind of control here.

She's certainly hinting at it, but without any proof, what can I do? It's just another way of making me feel helpless.

Ravenna turns to leave, but pauses and turns back. "I wonder, since Rowan is technically the loser of this bout, will they allow these trials to count towards his freedom?"

It's just another way for her to twist the knife. It hadn't occurred to me that Rowan might have done more than injure himself to save me. He has survived his bout against me but if he can't continue, he won't come through the Champions Trials, and he won't get the extra season marked off on the brand on his shoulder.

Again, the thought of it makes me feel sick. Ravenna is finding any way she can to hurt me. Maybe she thinks that if she does it enough, I will come crawling to her, begging to be her ally. At this stage, though, it mostly just makes me angrier with her.

"Could they do that?" I ask the trainer who split us up.

He shrugs. "That's a matter for the higher-ups, not for the likes of me or you. But I guess if he can't fight, then he can't get through the rest of the games. Missing the rest of this trial is the least of his worries. They might make him fight injured. After what he's done, it's the least he deserves."

That thought is even worse than anything Ravenna suggested. If Rowan is made to fight now with a broken leg, even he won't be able to win. I have already felt what it is like to think I have lost him, but if they make him fight on, that could happen in truth, rather than just as part of his plan.

I want to go speak to him about all of this. I set off in the direction of the makeshift infirmary beneath the colosseum, where stone slabs are spread out, either to hold the injured or the dead. The healers within don't really care which. I know Rowan will be

in there, and that they will be doing their best to restore him, if only because he is a more entertaining gladiator when he is fully fit than if he is injured. We get some of the best care available in Aetheria, in the same way that prize chariot horses are treated well. They want us to be able to perform at our peak, to give the most entertainment to the crowd before our deaths.

As I reach the infirmary, however, a guard blocks my way, holding up his hand to stop me.

“Halt there,” he commands, in the imperious tones of someone who knows that he is free and I am not. He looks me up and down, taking far too long about it. “As far as I can see, you aren't injured. Didn't get a scratch on you in your fight. You have no business here.”

“I wanted to see how Rowan is doing,” I say.

“Are you deaf? You have no business here. Move on.”

For a moment I think about pushing past him, just so that I can see Rowan and make sure that he is all right. But if I do that, I will be a slave gladiator attacking a free citizen of Aetheria. Even if I defeat the guard, the penalty for such a thing is likely to be harsh.

I step back instead, and as I do so, I see the cloaked figure of Malira walking out of the infirmary. She pauses in front of me, then lets the cloak fall.

“Do you like what you did?” she demands, as I stare at what is revealed.

The healers have done their best, but they cannot take away the scarring of the burns, or perhaps they don't want to waste the effort on it when they have other wounds to heal. It means that almost half of Malira's body is covered by burn marks, the right

half of her features twisted, her hair burned away. She looks like something out of nightmares, and she stares at me with hatred.

“You didn't have to attack me in there,” I reply.

“That's the arena,” she snaps. “But you cheated. You and your lover. Or one of them. I figure if the brute who works with stone is sacrificing himself to save you, more than one of them is getting a piece of you. But don't worry, I'll thin the ranks for you.”

I know she is to fight Alaric. Before, I wasn't worried by that. I had assumed that she would be too injured to fight. Now though it seems that not only is she able to fight, she is more determined than ever.

“I'm going to make him pay for what he did,” Malira says. “Watch the fight closely. I want you to see the moment when I kill him. And remember, it won't be long before you join him.”

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"Good luck in there," I say to Alaric, as he stands at the gates. I kiss him because I don't know if I'll have the chance to do it again. He responds enthusiastically, but only for a moment or two, before pushing me back.

"Don't worry so much," he says. "Do you really think Malira can beat me?"

I shake my head because I know it's what he wants, but the truth is that I'm worried. "You need to be careful. She's fast, faster than anyone should be using a blade that big. And she likes to run up the walls."

"It's all right, Lyra," Alaric says with a smile. "I've seen her fight. I know what to do."

He steps out into the arena. Even as he does it, a couple of guards come for me, along with a trainer.

"You should be up in the receiving rooms, entertaining the nobles," the trainer says.

"But the bout is just beginning," I complain.

"So?" the trainer shoots back. "Do you think you're one of the citizens here to watch the trials? Do you think all of this is for your entertainment? Now stop arguing, or I'll have you punished."

His expression suggests he would relish it, and I know better than to argue. As with the guard who was keeping me from Rowan, I have more than enough skills to force my way past him, and probably to stop him from punishing me, but doing so would

only mean greater penalties. I must do as he commands.

It means that I go up through the colosseum, to the gilded and marble filled space of the receiving rooms. Ravenna is already up there, and there's something about her smile that suggests she had a hand in this. What would it have taken? A simple word in the ear of one of the guards, reminding them that I should be up here? A nudge of her power, perhaps?

She's waiting, along with a trio of young noblemen.

“Ah, Lyra, there you are. The nobles have been just dying to meet you. Now, Alexis, I believe we were going to have some time together.”

She leads one of them away into one of the side rooms. I don't know if she's planning to seduce him or simply talk to him using her powers until he agrees to every plan she has. That doesn't really matter now, because what's more important is the way the other two are looking at me. One is dark-haired and in his thirties. The other is closer to my age, with blonde hair to his shoulders and an imperious look. Both are dressed in togas fringed with gold. The blonde-haired one has bangles on his left wrist, displaying his wealth where he can.

They sit on two of the couches in the receiving room, gesturing for me to sit on a third. The receiving room is empty except for us and a few servants, who stand by with blank expressions, waiting for commands.

“Can't we go somewhere we might be able to watch the fight?” I suggest. “You're going to miss Alaric fighting Malira.”

"Watch the most arrogant of all of us cut down by someone who looks half like a monster?" the dark-haired one says. "Hardly. I'm Bellus. This is Demos."

“What makes you think he'll lose?” I ask.

“All Alaric has is tricks,” Demos says. “When it comes down to it, Malira’s a real fighter. Pity she doesn't look so good anymore. Not like you. You're quite lovely, Lyra.”

"That's... kind of you to say," I say. From in here I can hear some of the sounds of the arena. I can hear the roaring of the crowd, and I've been in enough fights in the Colosseum to read those sounds. I know when blood has been spilled, and when there is a tense build up to the next clash. I know when one of the fighters has done something impressive. The fight is continuing, and it's frustrating not being able to see any of it.

Frustrating and frightening. Anything could be happening to Alaric out there, and Ravenna has ensured that I will not see it. I will only be able to imagine what's happening. Because instead I must spend my time with these two nobles.

“A drink,” Bellus says. “We should get you a drink.”

“I'm fine, thank you,” I reply, but he is already on his feet, going over to one of the servants and collecting a goblet of wine. He brings it over to me, passing it to me, practically pressing it into my hands.

“Here, drink.”

“I'm not sure I-”

“Drink,” Bellus commands, in a stern tone. “Or does that iron collar around your neck mean nothing?”

In one moment he has reminded me of the difference in our places. It isn't just that I

fight in the colosseum and he does not. That would be the difference between him and someone like Ravenna. For the third time in the brief space since my bout with Rowan, I am being reminded that I am not free.

I drink. The wine tastes bitter on my tongue. The two men do not drink, but watch me instead. The wine hits me hard and quickly. Maybe it is just because it is so soon after my bout and I have not eaten anything, but surely the room should not be so out of focus? Surely I shouldn't be finding it so hard to concentrate on the faces of the men?

“Now,” Demos says. “I think we should take this to another room, the three of us.”

“I...” I can't get the words out to tell them that I don't want to go with them. They take my arms, helping me to my feet, and I need their help, because my legs are unsteady.

I know in that moment that they put something in the wine. They have drugged me.

“Ravenna has promised us that you will make it up to us thoroughly for losing us coin in your bout,” Bellus says. “At the time I didn't think it was possible that anyone could make restitution for so much money, but I'm sure we'll find a way.”

I look to the servants, hoping that they will help me. I can't get out the words to ask for it, but even if I did, would any of them intervene? These are nobles, and I am not. Nor are the servants. The two men half carry, half walk me in the direction of the side rooms.

“Just what are you doing with my gladiator?” a voice snaps. Lady Elara steps into the space, and I feel as though I might weep with gratitude at her presence.

“Lyra here was just suggesting she might want to come with us,” Bellus says.

Lady Elara shakes her head. She takes hold of my arm, then stares at the two men until they let go of me. “I think that's... unlikely, don't you? I think you should go. Unless you want me talking to the emperor about your behavior?”

They back away. Lady Elara must support my weight because I'm still too unsteady on my feet to do it myself. She watches the two until they go, then turns her attention to me.

“I told you before that people aren't above poisoning a gladiator,” she says. “Although usually it's before a bout, rather than... for this.”

“Ravenna...” I croak out. The effort of speaking is almost too much.

“Come on, we will get you to my room and see if something could be done about whatever they've drugged you with.”

I shake my head, struggling to form the words. They come out slurred and broken, but I force them out anyway.

“The fight... I need... to see.”

For a moment or two, I think Lady Elara might ignore me. That she might take me somewhere private to help me, reasoning that it's for my own good.

“Please.”

She sighs. “All right. Come with me.”

She walks with me, supporting me all the way to a private box overlooking the arena. I can tell when we're getting closer to it because the noise of the crowd intensifies. This is a cool place, sheltered beneath a silk awning, but still with perfect views out

over the colosseum.

I have never seen it from this angle, and even though my vision is still swimming, it is spectacular. I can see everything here, not just the action, but also the crowds. I can see all the people of Aetheria spread out below me.

And I can see Alaric.

He is fighting against Malira, his curved sword and dagger against her one giant blade. He is bleeding from half a dozen wounds, when normally he avoids most damage. He seems to be tiring, every swing of his blades labored. Malira moves forward, ready to take advantage of his weakness. She swings her great blade in a wide arc aimed at Alaric's throat, obviously meaning to decapitate him as I hold my breath in fear.

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“No!” I cry out as Malira tries to kill Alaric. My heart hammers in my chest. Fear fills me.

That is when Alaric falls to both knees, letting her blade pass over his head. Malira's power lets her arrest the swing in mid-movement, but she is too late. Alaric's sword goes over his head to parry the sudden downstroke, while his dagger thrusts upward, into Malira's heart.

She stands there staring at him, as if she can't believe what is happening. Her blade clatters from her hands to the stones of the temple structure. Then she topples from it, already dead before she hits the ground.

Alaric lifts his blades, and the crowd erupts. Relief floods through me that he has survived, and I go to shout his name, but I don't have the strength. Instead, I collapse back onto a couch in Lady Elara's private box, darkness claiming me.

When I wake, it is night and I am in Alaric's rooms, back in Ironhold, with him looking down at me. For a moment, I can't remember what I'm doing there. I think that perhaps we have simply spent the night together in the wake of the trials yesterday.

Then memory comes flooding back in. The receiving area, the nobles, the goblet of wine.

“They drugged me,” I say, unable to keep the horror out of my voice. “They poisoned

me, and they were going to...”

“You’re safe,” Alaric says. He wraps his arms around me. “Nothing happened to you, Lyra. Did it?”

He must have heard what happened from Lady Elara, but now he wants to hear it from me. I shake my head.

“Nothing happened. Lady Elara intervened before they could get me into one of the rooms. If they’d managed to do that...”

I don’t want to think about the possibility, about what would have happened to me if Lady Elara hadn’t been there to save me from the two nobles. The cruelty in their eyes had been undeniable. They didn’t see me as their equal. They barely saw me as anything human at all. I might have been a victorious gladiator in the games, but to them, I was just a slave for them to toy with as they wished.

No, not as they wished.

“Ravenna did this,” I say. “She set me up. She was the one who had me summoned to the receiving rooms during your bout. She was talking with the men before she left me alone with them. She arranged all of this.”

Alaric’s face contorts with anger. “I wish I could kill her for you.”

I shake my head. I know it isn’t possible. Killing her outside of the arena would mean execution, and for all our powers, the guards and soldiers of Aetheria have more than enough magic of their own to fight us with.

“If I ever face her, I’ll kill her,” I say, and I’m surprised to find that I mean it. I have spent so long trying to be a good person, trying to hold myself above the violence of

the games, but I'm done with that, at least when it comes to Ravenna. She has gone too far.

“What I don't get is why she's done this,” Alaric says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Do you think she needs an excuse now to humiliate me? I'm sure she's the one who made me fight Rowan, and she has been finding small ways to hurt me ever since I said I wouldn't be her ally.”

Ever since she messed with Naia's mind and indirectly got her killed.

“It must be more than that,” Alaric says. “Ravenna always has a plan, a scheme of some sort. There must be some bigger picture to this. How do you feel this morning?”

I groan as I try to get out of bed. I currently feel as though I have the worst hangover I've ever experienced. My body feels weak, my head feels woolly, and I can barely concentrate.

“Not great,” I say.

“Maybe that's it,” Alaric says. “Maybe she wants to weaken you for this round. Do you think you will be able to fight properly, Lyra?”

He sounds concerned. Perhaps he knows that I will be made to compete regardless of how I feel. If Ravenna has successfully arranged for me to be poisoned, that won't make a difference. I will still need to fight, and if I'm weak enough, I won't be able to do so effectively.

“I will find a way to do it,” I say. “I won't let her have the satisfaction of seeing me fall. But what about you? You were hurt in your fight against Malira.”

My fingers trace the spots where Alaric was wounded. He hisses in pain, but the wounds are much less severe than they were. My guess is that it's Stefano's work.

“Careful, I didn't have enough time to get everything fully healed. Malira wounded me badly in our fight. You were right about her being dangerous.”

“I saw,” I say. “I made Lady Elara take me to her private box to let me see the fight.”

Alaric holds me closer. “You didn't need to do that. You should have focused on dealing with the drugs in your system.”

"I needed to know if you were alive or dead," I say. "One of the worst things Ravenna did was making me go to the receiving room. Not just because of what almost happened there, but because she deliberately timed it so I wouldn't be able to see your bout. I wouldn't be able to know what was happening. I think she hoped that you would be killed while I wasn't able to watch so it would hit me harder."

“I think you're assuming that everything is part of her cunning plan,” Alaric says.

“Isn't it?”

"I'm just saying don't overestimate her," Alaric insists. "Ravenna is clever, but she's still limited in what she can do, and I think half the time she takes credit for things because she wants to seem as though she's in control of everything."

Or maybe she really does have the power to control what's happening in the colosseum. She entered the games specifically to gain power and influence. Now, it seems she is wielding it from within.

In some ways she is a mirror to Lady Elara. Both noble women work from the shadows. Both are trying to use influence built up during the games to affect

Aetheria. The difference is that Lady Elara seems to be trying to change things for the better, while Ravenna is only interested in herself.

"I hope you're right," I say. I reach for Alaric, but he pulls back from me with a gentle smile.

"It's not that I don't want to," he says. "But neither one of us is in any shape to do anything. We need our strength, and... do you really want to be with me so soon after you've seen me kill?"

It's the first time he's expressed any remorse for killing. I was under the impression that slaying his foes didn't mean much to Alaric. Now, though, he seems to assume that I will think less of him because I saw the moment when he killed Malira.

And maybe being around him has changed me too, because I feel more than ready to kill Ravenna. I have killed people before, in the heat of the combat, but I have never felt the kind of hatred I feel now.

Alaric is right, we both need to save our strength, but even so, I hold to him for long moments. I don't want to let go of him tonight.

"My mother managed to pick up some of the gossip about the fourth trial," Alaric whispers to me. It isn't comforting or romantic, but it is something I need to hear. "She says that it will involve beasts."

"That makes no sense," I say. If Ravenna is manipulating the trials, she will want something that might prove a real challenge to me. Even the emperor and Lord Darius have no reason to make things easy for me. "Why would they put a challenge in that I have the ability to deal with?"

"Maybe it's random," Alaric says. "Or maybe they feel that they can't have a set of

trials without including beasts.”

“Or maybe there’s some deeper meaning to it all,” I suggest.

“Not everything needs that kind of deeper element,” Alaric says. “The games are dangerous enough without looking for plots around every corner.”

That’s true, but in this case, I’m pretty sure that the plots are there. So why present me with a trial where I’m likely to do well? I’m convinced that there’s some trick to this, some point that I’m not seeing.

But I can’t work it out, and the truth is that I’m tired. Too tired to do anything other than lie there in Alaric’s arms, waiting for sleep to claim me. We both need all the rest we can get, because in the morning, we will face the beasts.

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Morning comes all too soon, and with it, the next challenge for us to face. I still feel weak and groggy after being drugged yesterday. Maybe that was the point of it: maybe this trial is meant to be something that I should be able to handle easily, and now I have been sabotaged so that I can't.

That prospect weighs on me the whole way down into Aetheria, so that I can barely bring myself to look around at the crowds on every side. They continue to throng by the side of the road when by now in a normal set of games, the crowds would have thinned out to only the most fanatical and committed.

Instead, it seems that everyone in the city is on the streets. They continue to shout our names, continue to cheer for us and throw tokens of affection. And other, darker tokens. A lump of bloody meat hits my armor, bouncing off onto the street.

"Maybe if you get some blood in you, you'll fight, coward!" a man calls out. After my bout with Rowan yesterday, it's obvious that they haven't forgiven me for the lack of blood and death. They want me to be someone I'm not, some brutal killer with no remorse, who lives only to entertain them by cutting down my opponents in the most spectacular way possible.

They want me to be someone like Alaric.

That thought makes me uncomfortable, and that discomfort in turn makes me wonder why. I'm with Alaric, I care about him. I shouldn't be disconcerted by everything he is. How can I reject the brutality of the games and still be okay with the ease with which Alaric kills?

Except he seemed disappointed in himself for it last night. As if he feels he ought to change to be more like me. Or perhaps to be worthy of me.

It's a thought that carries me most of the way down to the Colosseum. The crowds are even thicker there, although there is one surprise, which is that the arena is empty, leaving a broad expanse of sand surrounded by the rows of spectators and the high walls. I can see commoners looking down at us from the lowest tiers, the nobles in their boxes. Even the emperor is there for the beginning of these trials, when normally I would expect him to arrive once we have all moved into position within the colosseum, so that he can make a grand entrance.

Instead, he waits there, gesturing to the middle of the sand. It's obvious that he wants us all to stand there, so we go there, holding our weapons, but without any helmets on so that the crowd has been able to see us. I wonder if I should put mine on now, because I can only think of one reason that the emperor might call us to the center of the sand, and that is to fight immediately.

I don't do it though, because I suspect readying myself for battle in the presence of the emperor would count as some kind of insult. Vex is bowing low. Ravenna curtsies, in an elegant gesture that seems far more demure than her usual attitude. Some of the others raise their weapons in salute. I don't do any of those things but stare upwards instead, looking at Emperor Tiberius as he stands up there in his box.

The crowd are clapping and cheering, but the emperor holds out his hands for silence, and quiet descends over the arena like a shroud. I see the trainers and the guards hurrying to get past the iron gates leading to the spaces below the colosseum. They clearly know that something is coming, and they don't want to be in the arena when it happens.

“Gladiators,” the emperor says. “On the previous days, my master of games and my arch magistrate have tested you with contests where you have fought one another,

fought your way through deadly mazes, survived elementals. You have faced each other in a complex of traps and deadfalls. Today, your objective is simpler. All you need to do is capture a mount.”

Capture a mount? What does that mean? I have no time to wonder about it, though, because moments later, one of the gates into the arena opens, and the sound of thunder rumbles across the sand.

The creatures that charge in are thunder hooves. They look like horses, although they are larger and stronger looking than the most powerful chariot horses or riding animals. They come in every color that a normal horse would come in: chestnut, grey, black, piebald. But their eyes glow with the power of lightning, which seems to crackle through them as they move, and their hooves strike thunder as they hit the earth.

There is a whole herd of them, and they are stampeding, driven forward by whatever means to terrify them the beast handlers in the colosseum have been able to come up with. They charge and circle, thundering around us, not stopping even for a moment. Some of them run at me, and I must throw myself to the side or be trampled. Another gladiator isn't so lucky. He is crushed beneath the hooves, the thunderous impact breaking his body apart.

The noise of it all is deafening, the power of the Stampede impossible to contain. The horses run at me again, and now I reach for my power, doing what I can to reach past the dampener on my wrist, to ignore the dizzy sickness that is the aftermath of the drugs. I reach out for one of them, forcing myself to stand my ground. The thunder hooves run around me, parting like the onrushing tide around a rock.

One of them slows as I concentrate though. This close, I can connect with it, even with my limited powers. It helps that the thunder hooves are not vicious predators set on destroying us all. Instead, they are simply frightened, and their instinct when they

are frightened is to use the power of their hooves to destroy whatever is threatening them.

I force myself to find a well of calm deep within myself, putting aside my own fears at the sight of the onrushing creatures. If I project that fear, I will only fuel the charge. Instead, I push calmness into creature, slowing it little by little, until it stands before me. I reach out with one tentative hand, touching its flank. Slowly, carefully I mount it, sitting atop it while around me the others are still dodging out of the way of the creatures, and the rest of the thunder hooves continue to charge this way and that.

I ride atop it. I could wait out the rest of the challenge. Perhaps I should. I should give the crowd the blood and death they want by letting the stampede continue unchecked. I know it is what the emperor will want. He will want to see gladiators crushed and killed.

Can I really risk angering him?

I can't just sit there and do nothing. Now that I have one mount under control, I turn my attention to another. I pick one of the herd, riding beside it and extending my mind to it. I slow it and calm it the way I did with the one I am riding. I lead it, guiding it next to me until we reach Alaric. He seems to be trying to distract the herd with illusions, forcing them to move around him and scatter. He looks surprised when I ride up on one of the beasts, but only for a moment. He quickly mounts the creature beside me, sitting there and breathing a sigh of relief.

"What now?" he says. "Do we just ride this out until the challenge is done?"

That would be the easy option, but there is at least one more person I want to help. I can see all of the others attempting to survive in different ways. Vex has his swarm of knives around him, keeping the creatures from getting too close. Ravenna is whipping around her spiked chain, while a gladiator throws himself into the path of a thunder

hoof to protect her, obviously pushed to it by her powers.

Finally I see Vesper, alone and cut off from the others. I ride over to him, reaching down my hand. I pull him up behind me, and as I do so I can feel my powers starting to expand. His presence means I can do more than I otherwise would.

An idea comes to me: a chance to make a statement.

It is an idea I know the emperor will not want me to go through with, one that runs counter to the whole point of this challenge. But we are here to survive if we can, and if I can help the others survive, shouldn't I do it?

Again, I wonder if I can risk the emperor's anger like this. But can I stand by and let more people die?

"How about we deal with this together?" I suggest to Vesper. I know that, together, we can.

Vesper nods, and I reach out with my power, not to one of the creatures this time, but to all of them. I can feel the herd, and it is like a single entity in some ways, the power of the creatures seeming to connect them to one another. I reach along that connection, spreading the calm of my mount from one thunder hoof to the next.

Slowly, the maelstrom of on rushing creatures slows, the thunder hooves coming to a halt one by one. They stand there, looking around peacefully, most of them not moving. No sounds of thunder erupt from the ground now.

Because they are still my fellow gladiators are able to mount them with ease. Vesper dismounts my beast with a grateful nod to me and claims another for his own. Even Ravenna and Vex clamber up onto the backs of two of the creatures, although Vex shoots an unhappy look my way. I'm tempted to make his mount rear up and unseat

him, but I hold back the urge. I want to demonstrate my control and restraint today, not engage in petty vindictiveness.

It seems to take a while for the crowd to realize that all of the surviving gladiators have succeeded in the task, and that the trial is over. A horn sounds to declare the end of it, and now the crowd is noisy, but it is not cheering my efforts. Instead it is booing and jeering, because once again I have cheated them of the blood and death that they believe are the point of the games.

I ignore them, riding my steed back in the direction of the iron gates, returning it to the trainers as the others dismount. Lord Darius himself is there waiting for me. He does not look happy. I feel fear rising in me. I know that this is the moment when I will pay for what I have just done.

“The emperor commands your presence.”

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This time I am not led through the city by guards, but am instead brought up through the arena, to a box overlooking everything. My weapons are taken from me, and I am allowed inside.

The box is opulent and regal. The imperial insignia of sword thrusting through a corona of magical power is everywhere. A golden throne sits at the heart of the box, shaped with scenes of warriors subduing whole armies using magic. A marble table is next to it, on which there is a golden platter piled high with the choicest cuts of meat.

The emperor sits on his throne, looking out towards the world. I know what is required of me now, so I fall to my knees before him before I'm forced to do so.

“So you are capable of showing some humility,” Emperor Tiberius says. “I had wondered. Look out there, Lyra. Tell me what you see.”

He gestures to the Colosseum.

“I see the crowd and the arena,” I say.

“I see a very unhappy crowd, and a very peaceful arena,” Emperor Tiberius snaps. “The two are not unconnected.”

“You think I should have allowed people to die?” I say.

"I think that's exactly what you should have done," the emperor says. "Or at least, you should have allowed them to take their own chances against the creatures, rather than solving the whole situation. You could have sat serenely at the heart of it all, and the

action could still be going. Perhaps when the last of them fell, then the crowd would have cheered you. As it is, they do not favor you, and I must find other ways to give them their sport."

He gestures to the arena. I see a group of men and women pushed out into it. They are armed with swords, but unarmored.

"I will pardon the last one standing," the emperor calls out. "Kill the rest."

The prisoners start to fight amongst themselves. Some have powers because this is Aetheria. One is able to coat her blade with frost, while another can make small bursts of flame fly at his foes. Compared to some of the things the gladiators chosen for the games can do, it isn't much but this is Aetheria, and even the lowest are likely to have some minor talent.

"Who are they?" I ask the emperor.

"Does it matter?" He looks to me as if waiting for me to answer.

"Of course it matters," I say. "Are you just throwing innocent people in there to die now?"

"There are those who would say that's what we do anyway," Emperor Tiberius says. "You were innocent when you were brought here, weren't you?"

I nod. I was, as were so many others alongside me. They had powers of various kinds, and for that reason they were collected from around the empire. Aetheria sees the stones at its heart as giving magic to the world, but where that magic takes root beyond its walls, it brings it back in.

"Do you know the purposes of the games?" the emperor asks me, as the fight

continues out on the sand. One of the people out there is already down and crying out in agony.

“To test magic users,” I say. “To make us feel grateful for the moment when we get to be citizens of the empire, because we won it with blood.”

“Both of those things, obviously,” the emperor says. “And of course, they feed the stones of Aetheria, with the blood and power of those who fight.”

Another of the combatants falls even as he says it, her throat opened by a blade wielded with surprising speed by one of the others.

“What do you mean they feed the stones?” I ask.

The emperor smiles. “That is why the game started. The stones give us power, because it is our destiny as an empire, but we must feed them in turn. Blood and magic. In the old days, citizens would battle to see who got high position and who would become a sacrifice. These days, we find that those from outside the city will suffice.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask the emperor. It makes no sense to me that he has summoned me here to talk so familiarly to me and to explain all this.

“Because you need to understand that the games are not something you can mess around with,” Emperor Tiberius says. He gestures to the prisoners out on the sand, still hacking at one another. “You did not provide enough blood today, so these people are going to die for it. This is your fault.”

“Spare them,” I beg. “Please.”

“No.” The emperor's expression has no mercy in it. “You need to learn the way this

city works. The games are important. They provide the people with entertainment, and my nobles were the chance to scheme behind my back to their hearts' content. They feed the magic that the empire is founded upon, and they give us a chance to be rid of those who will not be useful for our armies or our nobility."

There's a threat in that. Aetheria functions because, in spite of the magic of its people, they view themselves as part of a greater whole. The emperor and his ancestors have forged them into a sword to turn loose upon the world. Those, like me, who do not fall into place can find ourselves eliminated.

"What about people who try to manipulate the games themselves?" I ask. If the emperor cares so much about his precious games, maybe he will take my concerns around Ravenna seriously.

"Who would do that and how?" the emperor asks me.

"Ravenna," I say. "She had me poisoned yesterday."

"Petty rivalries between gladiators have always played out," the emperor responds.

"And I believe she is manipulating Lord Darius and Lady Selene as they organize the games so that the trials are set up the way she wishes. She's the reason I had to fight Rowan yesterday."

"Be careful what you say," Emperor Tiberius warns me. "After all, you and he are the ones who got away with no one dying."

"But Ravenna is the reason we had to fight each other at all," I insist.

"Or Lord Darius simply decided it would be an interesting match," the emperor says. "I have him and Lady Selene organize the bouts for a reason. Do you think Ravenna

is really able to influence them?"

"She's a powerful psychomancer," I say.

The emperor laughs now. "Powerful enough to overcome Darius's defenses? Powerful enough that Selene didn't notice? Or do you think that Ravenna bewitched her too? She might be strong, but she's not powerful enough to take on an archon."

It's the same thing I heard from Lady Elara. It's clear the emperor doesn't believe me.

"Why would she even do such a thing?" the emperor demands.

"I don't know," I say. "To make money betting? To give herself easier bouts? To make sure that I get the most difficult bouts she can give me?"

"You think too much of yourself, Lyra," the emperor says.

Out on the sands, the fight is coming towards its end. Only two of the prisoners are still standing, a man and a woman. Both are bloodied, their clothing torn and scorched. The woman has created a kind of shield from the air in front of her. The man is the one who seems to be able to move faster than he should. It is making for a drawn-out fight, with both of them suffering injuries at every turn.

The crowd is responding to the violence, cheering for every drop of blood spilled. The man cuts a gash along the woman's thigh. She punches him in the face with her shield. The man lunges in... and meets a second barrier of air, which holds his sword just for a moment.

A moment is all the woman needs. She runs her sword through the man's heart, and he falls back to the sand. She stands there, staring up at the emperor's box, even as the crowd erupts in praise of her.

“There!” she snarls. “I’ve done what you wanted.”

The emperor looks amused. “You asked before who they were, Lyra. A small group of plotters, who were trying to keep grain shipments from the city. They thought it would stoke the unrest. My understanding is that the woman down there was the lover of one of the dead men. Maybe even the one she just killed.”

“That’s...”

The emperor cuts me off before I can finish the thought. "That is the reality of ruling. I do what I must for the benefit of Aetheria. In this case, a group of traitors has died entertaining the crowd, and their pitiful talents were flowed back into the stones. No, don't say anything. If you speak, I will have the woman there broken on a wheel to finish the entertainment."

I want to protest that he has promised her mercy, but one look in his eyes tells me that he is serious. A single word from me will cost this woman her life. Maybe my actions have already been responsible for the others’ deaths, although I suspect they would have been thrown into the arena in another set of games anyway. I cast my eyes down instead.

“Good,” the emperor says. “You’re learning.” He raises his voice. “This woman has survived and shown her strength. As a result, she will not be executed, but will instead be taken to Ironhold to be tested as a new prospect.”

I feel a twinge of sympathy for her. I know exactly how difficult that process is, and I don’t want to think about the fate that might wait for her if she fails.

The emperor looks back to me. "You have so much potential, Lyra. You could be everything the game needs. You have one more trial to show me that you can live up to that potential, or I will be very disappointed in you. And you wouldn't want that,

Lyra."

Not when this is a man who still seems to be deciding whether to have me killed. I understand what he wants. I need to give him blood in the last trial, and if I don't... then it is going to be my blood spilled on the sand instead.

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“It will be a battle royale,” Zara insists, back in the dining hall of Ironhold. “They will throw all of you into the arena and insist that you fight until only one is left.”

I sincerely hope that isn't the case. It would mean fighting close to ten people at once. The chaos of it would be impossible to contain... and I would have to fight Alaric. After my bout with Rowan earlier, I know I can't dismiss the possibility. There is always a chance I will be forced to fight him, even now. In spite of what the emperor has said, I remain convinced that someone is manipulating these games, and they are doing so in a way that affects me specifically.

Not that it makes sense, the last trial was too easy for me, when the others seem to have been set up to be difficult, or to force me into situations I do not want. I'm still not sure what to make of it all.

“They wouldn't do that,” Alaric says. He is down with the rest of us for once. “It would mean they lose all their best gladiators at once. Even the emperor wouldn't sacrifice all of us.”

I'm not so sure of that. Not after the way he threw the criminals into the arena so casually. He will do anything for the entertainment of the crowd and to feed the magic that underpins Aetheria.

The new gladiator has arrived. Her name is Alicia, and she sits in a corner of the dining hall, looking around warily, her dark hair pulled in front of her eyes as if she might hide behind it. There is still something soft about her body, where all the rest of us have hardened through training. Will she make it into this place? I don't know, and for the moment I can't focus on her. My attention must be on the final challenge

tomorrow.

“Perhaps the emperor is going to say that even the best of us can be sacrifice for the entertainment of the crowd,” I suggest.

Alaric shakes his head. “I won't believe that until I see it. It must be something else.”

"It will be a one-on-one fight," Ravenna says, with surprising certainty as she sweeps past to join some of the other nobles at the far end of the hall.

“How can you know that?” Alaric asks her.

She just smiles at him in response.

I want to go after her and try to force answers out of her, but I don't have any way to do so. I can't make her tell me anything, and I won't be able to trust anything she does say. It means it's useless trying to talk to her about it.

In any case someone who is worth rather more of my attention walks into the dining hall in that moment.

Rowan strides in as if he had never been injured. The healers of Ironhold are good at their work, especially in a way it comes to major injuries such as his broken leg. They don't care so much about minor cuts or scarring, those things won't stop a gladiator from fighting, but broken limbs are something they have learned to heal cleanly. It means that gladiators can fight on in their next season, providing more entertainment for the crowd.

Robin should look happy that he's back to full health, that he's safe once more, and will soon be able to fight again, but instead he looks furious.

“They aren't going to let me fight tomorrow,” he says.

I realize that no one has told him the news, that no one has spoken to him until now about the decision made about his participation in these trials.

“I know,” I say. “I'm sorry, Rowan.”

Rowan shakes his head. “But I'm fit. I'm in one piece. Why wouldn't they let me finish?”

I can hear the near desperation in his voice. I can understand why: after everything he's been through, he wants to get one step closer to his freedom. That is exactly what they're denying him by refusing to let him continue.

“It's intended as a punishment,” I say. “The emperor is angry about us both cheating death in our bout, so he has declared that you are the loser and can't continue.”

Rowan looks even more unhappy about that. “And so I'm going to be stuck here for another season, at least after the rest of you.”

It isn't just time, though, because another season means another set of bouts, more chances that he might be killed in the colosseum. Even Alaric looks a little sympathetic to his plight.

“What you did was the only way that both you and Lyra could survive,” Alaric says.

Roman looks briefly surprised by this note of understanding, but then he seems annoyed by it. “I don't need your sympathy.”

Alaric shrugs. “Then don't have it. I won't give you my deep sympathy that you don't get the chance to die tomorrow in some battle on the sands.”

“I wouldn't die,” Rowan shoots back. “Who do you think could beat me? You?”

Alaric stands, and in just moments, it seems that the situation is hurtling towards a potential fight. I stand between the two of them, and as I do so, I feel something, a familiar pressure at the edges of my mind. I understand what's going on, especially since Ravenna is smiling there from across the room. No wonder she's down in the dining hall rather than enjoying fine food back in her rooms.

“Ravenna is doing this,” I say to them. “She's feeding your anger. Stop it, both of you.”

I put my arms out, putting a hand on the chest of each of them, caught between them for a moment as I try to hold them back. Ravenna still seems to be enjoying herself, at least until Alicia picks up a wooden trencher and flings it at her, forcing Ravenna to duck.

With her concentration broken, Ravenna's manipulation ceases instantly. Alaric and Rowan both blink and stop pushing forward against my hands, no longer trying to get to one another.

Ravenna is on her feet, moving towards the newcomer. “You think you get to do that to a noble gladiator? I'll see to it that you're whipped!”

“Let's discuss what you just tried to do,” Alaric says. Rowan is there beside him then, and Ravenna seems to understand the difficulty of her situation. She backs away, leaving the dining hall.

“Thank you,” I say to Alicia.

She shrugs. “I don't like it when people try to control other people. Not the emperor, not the city, and not her.”

"I hope you make it through your testing," I say. "Remember, the only way to fail is to give up."

"And if I succeed, I get to fight and maybe die here," she says.

"And perhaps you could be free," I point out. "If you make it through your five seasons."

"Do you think any of the citizens are truly free?" Alicia says with a laugh. "But thank you, I'll bear it in mind."

Lord Darius comes in as we're standing there. He goes to the chalkboard at one end, used to set out the details of upcoming games. He starts to set out names opposite one another. It seems that Ravenna was right, this will be a series of one-on-one bouts.

My name is drawn opposite hers. In that moment I think I start to understand some of what's going on.

Why would she want to control what's going on in the trials? I had thought, just in terms of money and political influence, about her being able to point people in the right direction for their bets, but now I can see there's more to it than that. I can see that from the start of this, she has been setting this whole contest up the way she wants. All to come to this point.

I know what people have told me, about her not having the power to do it, about her not being able to influence Lord Darius, or fool Selene Ravenscroft. I understand that, because I've been able to throw off her control before, and I've certainly been able to feel what's happening.

But now I think I can understand how she has done this and what her endgame is.

“Ravenna could be a difficult opponent for you,” Alaric says, looking at the board. “One on one, with her focusing all her mental control on you... she’s dangerous.”

“You mean you're worried she will make me kneel before her while she cuts my throat,” I say.

Alaric swallows. “If you aren’t careful, yes.”

"I know exactly how dangerous she is," I assure him. She is a deadly, manipulative opponent who has been affecting things since the start of these trials, if not before. And tomorrow, I suspect she will have at least one more trick for me. But I think I might have one of my own.

I just hope it will be enough, or I will be fighting her with my powers restricted while she has full access to hers.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:24 am

My nerves build moment by moment as I make my way down to the arena in the morning. This is to be the last day of the Champions Trials, and in some ways it is to be the simplest. Today we will fight the way we would normally fight in the games. No tricks, no strange environments or dangerous animals. Just two gladiators on the sands with our powers and our strength.

The crowds are more subdued after yesterday's trial with the thunder hooves. Fewer people are cheering my name, and the more I think about it, the more I suspect that's a part of Ravenna's plan, along with the rest of it.

I can feel the way the pieces are fitting into place for her. I can see the point of all this for her now and what she hopes to gain. I just hope I'm going to be able to stop her, because if I can't I'm going to die today.

I look over to Alaric, marching down to the games. His eyes meet mine. He isn't playing to the crowd today. He looks worried, not for himself, because nothing could pierce his self-belief when it comes to his abilities in a fight, but for me. I want to reassure him that I will be fine, but I cannot do that here and in any case I'm not sure it's the truth. Ravenna has laid her trap well, and my only chance of coming out of it alive is to walk into it first.

I walked down to the arena with the others, moving through the slums of the city and the noble parts. The colosseum awaits us ahead, and we go inside, moving straight through to the sections beneath to await the call to fight.

I sit there with my spear across my knees, waiting, trying to calm my racing heart. How long I sit there I don't know. Outside, I can hear the emperor welcoming the

crowds. All too soon, a trainer comes for me accompanied by guards.

“It's time,” the trainer says. “Move.”

I go with them, heading to the iron gates and then stepping beyond them. Ravenna is already out there on the sand, waiting for me.

“These are to be your first two gladiators to fight,” the emperor says. “Lady Ravenna and the mistress of beasts, Lyra. Gladiators, are you ready?”

"I would speak first, my emperor," Ravenna says, loud enough that she's heard by the crowd.

I know this is a part of it, a part of what she's been building up to. I must survive this part as much as what comes next.

“Very well,” the emperor says.

“The gladiator Lyra has been interfering in these games,” Ravenna says, the shape of her plan finally revealed. “We all know that someone has, and look at the things she has done. She has cheated the crowd of the blood it wishes in the maze. She has sought outside help within the fire ring. She has conspired with one of her lovers in the fight in the temple, neither of them truly fighting one another. Somehow she managed to persuade people to give her the challenge of the thunder hooves in the fourth trial, and there again she cheated the crowd of the true spectacle of all of us fighting for our lives.”

Around me, the crowd is booing, starting to believe her. I realize that's part of the point of her plan. She wants to make me into a villain so that she looks like a hero for killing me. That, or she will demand my execution rather than having to fight me.

“And how do you believe I've influenced the trials?” I ask.

“Probably you got your patron to speak into the right ears,” Ravenna snaps back. “I'm sure you have her to the point where she will do anything you ask.”

She continues the insinuations of the rumors about me and Lady Elara. Those rumors have kept us safe, because they have hidden the fact that she is teaching me the skills of a beast whisperer, but now, they increase the danger.

“My emperor,” Ravenna says. “I call on you to declare Lyra a heretic, suborning the holy nature of these games. I call on you to have her executed, here on the sands, to appease the gods and the crowd!”

The crowd roars and boos, their fury obvious. In this moment, if I do not speak, I will be condemned.

“My emperor, may I speak against these charges?”

The emperor nods. “But speak well, Lyra, because the accusations are serious, and they fit with what we've seen.”

“Deliberately so,” I say. I point at Ravenna. “I am not the one who has been manipulating these games; she is. She has been using her powers of the mind to manipulate the matchups. You will find evidence of her and her friends making money from betting on the lineups of the fights. I believe that she has manipulated this whole set of trials to cause me pain, to make me look guilty, but also to give herself the easiest route through the trials that she can.”

A murmur runs through the crowd at my counter-accusation.

“Lies!” Ravenna says. “Are you suggesting that even I am powerful enough to

manipulate all of the organizers of the games?"

That has been the argument that people have made to me throughout these trials in the face of my suspicions. They all know the limits of Ravenna's power, or they think they do.

"Not alone," I say. I look at her. "You shouldn't have had Vesper help me in the maze, Ravenna. You shouldn't have sent him to get close to me. But I guess you had to in order to make the fourth trial work." I turn my attention to the emperor, trying to ignore the pain I feel at that betrayal. Because it is a betrayal and a big one. Vesper made me believe that he was my friend, that he was there to help me. Instead, he was only out to help himself. I have been told again and again that it is the way of things in the colosseum, but that doesn't make it hurt less. "The gladiator Vesper also has the magic of the mind, but his focus is on boosting the powers of others. Here's the reason that even with a dampener around my wrist, I was able to control a herd of thunder hooves. Imagine what he could do for Ravenna's power when she is not restricted in the same way. With his help, she could control Lord Darius. She could do it without the arch magistrate sensing anything."

"Lies!" Ravenna says. "Nothing but lies!"

"The logic is sound, Tiberius," a woman's voice says. There are few people who would call him that, and I know the voice in any case. Lady Selene Ravenscroft, the arch magistrate, steps to the front of her box. She is younger than her white hair suggests, only in her thirties, shorter than I am, with a slender figure encased in white robes, but she is one of the most powerful magic users in the whole empire. I have seen her blast a wraith into nothingness with barely any effort.

The emperor stands there, looking to each of us. He nods to Selene. "Find the truth of this."

Selene gives a brief bow, then steps from the edge of her box, floating down to the ground as if it is nothing. She lands between me and Ravenna, moving towards Ravenna.

“I will look into your mind and find the truth,” she declares.

“I am a free noble of the empire,” Ravenna snaps. “You have no right to do such a thing.”

“I have been instructed to do so by the emperor,” Selene retorts. “That gives me every right I need.”

“Well, I will not let you into my mind,” Ravenna says, and that is no idle declaration. She is powerful in her way, and while she couldn't take on the arch magistrate in a straight fight, she may be able to keep Selene out of her thoughts.

Selene produces something from within her robes. I recognize it as a dampener, similar to the one I'm wearing. She moves forward, and Ravenna looks as though she might try to stop her from placing it on her wrist, but then seems to realize the foolishness of that. As powerful as we all are in Ironhold, there are those within the empire with more power, and it possesses an army, filled with people who all have their own minor talents. If she strikes at Selene, she might not be declaring her guilt, but she will be guilty of attacking a noble woman.

It means she must let Selene strap the dampener around her wrist. The archmagistrate seems to concentrate for a few seconds. I can see Ravenna's eyes clouding over.

“Tell us the truth,” Selene says. “Did you conspire with the psychomancer Vesper to suborn the trials.”

I can see the tension in Ravenna's body as she tries to fight, but she doesn't have the

power now to hold back the arch magistrate.

“Yes,” she says. “I did it.”

A gasp goes out around the crowd.

“And what were you seeking to achieve?” Selene asks, in a stern tone.

“Money, power, fame,” Ravenna says. “If I built Lyra up into a villain, I could guarantee myself an easy ride through these trials, with her as my final opponent. By making everyone hate her, I could make myself into a hero when I killed her. Even the emperor would be grateful.”

“And now I am not grateful,” Emperor Tiberius says, in a tone that promises violence. “Guards, seize the gladiator Vesper and take him to the dungeons to be executed at my leisure.”

I feel a wave of sadness at that. I know I would not be alive right now if it were not for him. He helped me so much in the games. But he also did that purely because it suited Ravenna’s interests. His betrayal is too painful to ignore right now.

“Seize Ravenna,” the emperor continues. “She can be executed now on the sands. As she pointed out, that is the fate of those who suborn the games.”

Ravenna looks horrified as she sees her plan unraveling, and she understands the consequences of it.

“No!” She says. “I am a noble woman. A free gladiator! You cannot-”

“I am the emperor!” Emperor Tiberius roars. “I may do as I wish!”

Ravenna's fear fills her face. She is looking round as if she might run, but I'm not sure where she will run. Even if she somehow makes it out of the colosseum, she will be faced with an empire that is hostile to her, and in which she will be hunted down.

I stand there for several seconds. I know that all I need to do now is step back and let the guards take her. She will be punished for what she has done. She will die for it, probably in a horrific fashion.

I don't know what it is that makes me speak up. Maybe it is the potential horror of her fate. Maybe it's the sense that things shouldn't end like this. Or maybe it's the memory of Naia, manipulated by her and ultimately left to die.

“My emperor!” I call out.

“What is it?” Emperor Tiberius says. He sounds as though he’s expecting me to plead for mercy for the condemned gladiators. The annoyance in his tone makes it clear that would do no good, even if I tried it.

"Ravenna did all this so that she could face me in combat at the end. She thought she would have an advantage because she would have her full powers while I would wear a dampener. Now she wears one too. Rather than execute her, why not let her have this fight that she has longed for?"

The emperor looks as though he might rebuke me, but then he looks thoughtful. “Is this some plan to try to be merciful with her, Lyra?”

I look to him, then to her, then back again. “Not with her. Not after everything she has done.”

When I look at Ravenna, I feel only a steely determination to finish this.

“Very well,” the emperor says. “It will be as you suggest. Selene, move clear of the sands. Leave the dampener around Ravenna’s wrist.”

Ravenna is clawing at that dampener, as if she might be able to remove it. She should know that it's impossible for her to do so. Only someone else can take it from her. Eventually she seems to realize that and determination settles over her face as well.

"All right," she says. "Powers or no powers, I can still beat you. You shouldn't have suggested this, Lyra, because all that's going to happen now, is that I'm going to kill you and I'm going to get to survive. You could have seen me dead just by walking away."

“And I'm sure that's what you would have done,” I say. “Always trying to twist the situation, always trying to get the biggest advantage. But I'm not you.”

“No, you aren't,” Ravenna says. “You're a fool. You could have been my friend, Lyra. We could have done great things together.”

“People like you don't have friends,” I snap back. “You just have people you use.”

“Enough talking,” the emperor commands as the arch magistrate clears the sands. “It is time for this to end.”

I stand opposite Ravenna, lifting my spear, testing the weight of my weighted chain. She has her spiked chain in her hands, her curved knife held ready.

“Gladiators, begin!”

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:24 am

We rush at each other, my spear thrusting for her heart while her spiked chain whips around at my face, we both dodge to the side just in time, avoiding each other's weapons and coming around for another pass.

Each of us has what we want in this moment. Ravenna has a chance to kill me and take a position where she is feared if not respected, and she will preserve her life. I have a chance at revenge. I am determined to take it. I attack again, thrusting with my spear at her leg. She spins aside from the attack, slashes at me with her knife and keeps moving.

We are both fighters who are trained to move quickly, to hit and run, to dart in and out of range. We circle one another, looking for openings. Ravenna attacks me with sweeping blows of her spiked chain, but there is no obvious pattern to it, nothing I can time to get inside. I punctuate her attacks with thrusts of my spear and swings of my weighted chain. For the moment, at least, neither of us has the advantage.

“You might as well submit, Lyra,” Ravenna says. “You’re not as skilled as me.”

I know that's true. Ravenna has been in the arena longer than me and has built up more skills. More than that, I haven't spent my time trying to kill people, while she is nothing if not deadly. Do I really have a chance here?

I can feel the weight of my power trying to press on me, slowing me down, even with the effect of the dampener. Without it I'm sure she could make me give in completely. She could make me beg her to kill me. Even like this, I must fight against the pressure of the doubts that she throws at me, the insistence that I'm not good enough, that I will never be her equal.

The effort of that slows me, and I'm not fast enough to move away from the next attack. She slashes me with her knife, hot pain flaring along my side, blood spraying onto the sand as the crowd roars its approval.

I throw off her control, reaching out with my own magic for the eyes of the carrion crows, borrowing some of their reflexes and their sight. It makes me faster, letting me dodge her next attacks. Our magics seem to balance one another, her attempts to slow me down offset by what I have been able to gain from the birds. If we had our full powers we could do so much more but with both of us restricted like this, it is going to be a physical contest between us.

I slash with the head of my spear, spin around and swing my weighted chain at her head. She leaps over the spear, then cartwheels away from the chain, sending the end of her own chain at me so that I must weave aside or be cut open by the vicious spikes.

We keep trading attacks from a distance, each of us looking for a weakness in the other person, but neither of us holding back. I don't think I've ever had a fight like this. Often in my fights I have been taking on someone bigger and stronger, who bulls forward at me, not someone who employs the same strategy as me. It means our fight looks almost like a dance, with our weapons flowing in constant movement, trying to force each other into positions where we won't be able to defend anymore.

The fight is different for another reason, too. For the first time, I am setting out with the intention of killing my opponent. For the first time, I want nothing else other than her death. I can feel my anger and my need for vengeance boiling inside me, and I'm sure they lend me speed as well.

My spear scores a line of blood across Ravenna's thigh. Her chain brings up gashes on my arm. We are both bleeding now, neither one of us showing signs of slowing down, both of us trying to weaken the other and create an opportunity for a killing

blow. I am used to Ravenna being a passive, manipulative figure, but now she seems like some deadly snake waiting to strike.

I can hear the crowd cheering us on, and they seem to be cheering for each of us almost equally. They may hate what Ravenna has done, but she has ensured that they don't entirely like me either. In any case, what they want most is the fight, the blood, and we are both obliging them. Ravenna's armor protects her from a thrust of my spear. I deflect her dagger with my vambraces. We run at each other, pass in a blur of violence, and then turn to do it again.

I can feel my heart pounding and my breath coming in shorter bursts. Sweat mingles with the blood on me, dripping down onto the sand of the arena. I catch a brief glimpse of the other gladiators watching from the gates leading to the arena. Alaric is there, pressed up against the iron gates, his expression seeming to will me on. I can see the emperor, too, in his box, looking stern and implacable. Does he want me to win? I would be a fool to think that he's on my side. Certainly, he will show me no mercy if I lose.

But I am not thinking about losing, only about finding a way to finish Ravenna.

We are starting to move more slowly now as the fight wears on. It has become clear that the battle will not be decided by some swift burst of violence or sudden tactics, but instead by patience and timing, seeking the moment for the perfect attack. Each of us tries to draw the other out, seeking to lure one another into an overextension that we can exploit.

I have an advantage in one way, because my spear gives me the chance to inflict a finishing wound from a distance. Unless Ravenna can get her spiked chain around my throat, its main purpose is to make me bleed and weaken me until she can come in close with her dagger. I try to focus on attacking her from the end of my spear range, using my weighted chain to distract her, then thrusting. She dodges each attack still.

She kicks up sand towards my eyes. It's enough to make me flinch, but I'm ready for any sudden rush. What I'm not ready for is her whipping her chain around the haft of my spear, ripping it from my grasp and then tossing it aside on the sand.

Now we are more equal. I draw my short dagger, and the two of us could be mirrors of one another, each attempting attacks with our chains, each attempting to find a way to get close enough for a finishing blow.

Ravenna is slowing. I see her fumble the swing of her chain, and I dart into the gap she has left. Too late, I realize it is a trap. She is already moving aside, and her chain wraps around my legs, the agony of the spikes digging into me even as she trips me and sends me sprawling in the sand.

She follows me down not giving me any respite. Her dagger flashes in the sunlight, and I must grab her wrist to keep it from me, using the threat of my own dagger to keep her at bay. She's looming over me, trying to use her weight to drive the dagger down into my chest.

“They're going to cheer for me when I kill you,” she assures me.

I throw myself to one side, rolling on the sand, her dagger digging into the dirt where I was just lying. I kick off her chain from my legs, ignoring the blood that's pouring from the wounds there as I struggle back to my feet.

“I'll take you a piece at a time if I have to,” Ravenna says. “Sooner or later the pain will get too great, and you won't be able to keep me out of your mind anymore.”

As if to punctuate that she renews her mental assault. I fight back, but it's almost too great. I feel the moment when the crow plummets from the sky, dying as I take too much from it. I shrug off the attack but barely.

“I’m going to make you offer up your throat to me,” Ravenna assures me, even as she starts her spiked chain spinning and whirling again.

I know I need to do something, or I’m going to lose this bout. I focus on my own chain, trying to match the rhythm to hers. I set my feet in the sand, knowing that this isn’t about hitting and moving anymore. I have to finish this. I can’t just let her bleed me little by little until my resistance is gone.

I swing my chain, aiming, not for her, but for her chain. The two tangle in the air, knotting around one another until they seem to form one continuous strand between us. I take hold of my chain firmly and I pull, dragging the two of us closer little by little. Ravenna has the choice now to either let go of her chain or be dragged forward. She chooses the latter, slashing at me with her knife as she comes, but I’m ready for the attack.

I let my armor take the brunt of the blow, not caring about the pain as it carries on to open up my flesh, instead I move closer, inside Ravenna’s reach. I thrust upwards with my dagger, underneath her rib cage, up into her heart.

“This is for Naia,” I say, as I drive the dagger deeper.

She gasps, her eyes going wide as I deal the killing blow. She looks as if she is trying to say something, trying to plead. I can feel her power reaching out for me, but it is already fading. I hold her there, transfixed on my knife for a moment, staring into her eyes.

Then I let her go and she falls to the sand, blood pooling around her as she dies. I stand there holding the knife in my hand, and I raise it, the still bloody edge catching the light.

The crowd goes wild in the wake of the kill.

“Lyra! Lyra! Lyra!”

I can hear them chanting my name. I can see the emperor is on his feet, and I bow my head as I salute him, knowing it is required. But mostly I feel numb. I have killed Ravenna. I have gotten the revenge I wanted. I have shown myself to be the gladiator the emperor wants, and I have survived my last challenge of the Champions Trials. I should feel ecstatic at that, but I do not feel anything as I walk from the arena.

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I have won, but I don't feel it. I'm aware of the other bouts happening, but I can't bring myself to watch them, and no one tries to summon me to the receiving area of the colosseum. They all seem to sense that I need to be alone.

Finally though I cannot avoid people any longer. It is time for the Champions Trials to close, which means a ceremony in front of the emperor, and stepping back hours into the middle of the arena so that people can celebrate us.

I walk out there with the others, but there are far fewer than when we began these trials. Alaric has survived. So has Vex. Rowan is not here, Because he is still back at Ironhold. Barely a handful of us stand on the sand while the crowd cheers at our entrance.

Vex raises his hand triumphantly, as if he has only just won a fight, rather than this being the ceremonial occasion. Alaric waves to the crowd. I stare out at them, looking from one person to the next, trying to guess what it is that makes these blood-soaked games so popular.

The emperor is waiting in his box, staring down at us with Lord Darius beside him.

“Gladiators, you have faced some of the greatest challenges in the last few days. The Champions Trials are designed to push beyond the usual limits gladiators face. You have also faced treachery and still come through it. Those of you who have survived have shown yourselves to be the best of Aetheria, strong in your magic, deadly in combat. All of us here salute you!”

The crowd roars in response to his words, the noise of it washing over me like the

ocean, too great for me to pick out individual voices. Yet, I can hear my name being chanted. That is the fickle nature of the crowd. At the start of the day, they were booing me. They hated me. Now I have given them the death they crave, and they have forgiven me everything else. Perhaps they have decided that me not killing my opponents the way they wanted was all Ravenna's fault, and that I have now shown I can be who they want me to be.

“You have succeeded, and so you have earned your reward. Darius!”

Lord Darius steps forward, lifting a hand and concentrating, making a single downward motion with one finger. It is a piece of theater because I know he could do this with just a thought.

Pain blossoms in my left shoulder as I am burned by his power. I see all the others there wince, as the same pain flows through them. A fresh mark now runs across the circular brand on my shoulder, making three in total. Two more and I will be free. That thought should make me happy, but instead I can only think about Rowan, who is stuck on two, thanks to the decision of the emperor, and about all those who have died so I can get this far. And what I must do to earn those last two marks.

I swallow at the thought of how hard the road ahead is likely to be. Ravenna and her manipulations are gone, but that doesn't mean that I'm safe. I'm anything but that, when my life still consists of training to be thrown into the colosseum against other gladiators skilled with weapons and magic.

“Gladiators, go, return to Ironhold,” the emperor commands. “Enjoy your rest for now, but also prepare. The colosseum will see you again, soon enough.”

We leave, walking back to our fortress prison along routes lined with the adoring public. We pass the temple to the gods, and Vesper's body is already outside it, bloodied and impaled in sacrifice for his role in trying to manipulate the games. I feel

a twinge of sadness at that. I liked him a little. He made me like him, made me trust him, and although that betrayal hurts, it also hurts to see his fate.

But it could so easily have been my fate. If Ravenna had convinced the emperor, we wouldn't even have fought. I would have been taken here and killed in what looks like the most horrific way possible. I am grateful to have avoided that, but it's just one more reason why I do not feel the elation of the others as we head back to Ironhold.

Within the others are gathered in the main practice ground. Lord Darius stands there at the front of the yard, looking out over us.

“The games are done,” he says, “and we honor the dead as we always must. Some lost their way. They lost sight of what the games are about. Remember that they are a holy thing, and that to go against them is to go against the whole of Aetheria.”

He looks to where Rowan is standing, then looks my way, as if warning the two of us not to repeat any of what we've done in these games. Rowan looks dejected at losing his chance to keep moving towards freedom. He will need another three seasons now, where I need only two.

“The fallen!” Lord Darius says, slamming his fist against his chest and then raising it in salute to the dead.

“The fallen!” we echo. Some rituals can't be ignored. And there are other traditions too. As soon as we are done remembering the dead, the gladiators spread out, music and wine flow, and we celebrate our survival and success.

This is a strange celebration because ordinarily, everyone involved would have taken part in the games. As it is, many of the gladiators at Ironhold haven't played any part in the Champions Trials. But they still take the chance to let off steam. Zara is dancing with wild abandon. I see Cesca drinking quietly in the corner, while Arctus

gotten hold of a leg of chicken on the horn of wine. Around me, gladiators are celebrating and enjoying themselves.

Alaric tries to pull me into the mess of it, a smile on his face as he leads me out to dance with him. It's a moment when I should feel close and connected to him, when I should be caught up in the joy of having survived. This should be a night where we fall on one another with passion and need, as we have done before.

"I don't think I can handle all this noise and celebration," I say, whispering close to him.

"We could go somewhere else," Alaric suggests.

I shake my head. "Not right now. I know you want to enjoy the party, and I'm not going to drag you down."

"You wouldn't be," Alaric insists, but I know better. I know him. In this moment he wants to lose himself in wine and song and movement. Normally I would join him. Right now, though, I don't feel as though I'm done remembering the dead.

"You stay," I say. "We'll find each other soon enough."

I leave the party, heading for the beast pits since they're the place in the fortress where I feel most comfortable. None of the others get in my way. Even Vex seems to be giving me a wide berth after what I did to Ravenna.

The beasts are calm down in their pens and cages. They seem to sense that none of them will be called on to fight in the immediate future. I head for the pen that holds the shadow cat I have bonded with. It comes to me, rubbing up against me and letting me pet it the way I might with a kitten rather than a great cat imbued with magical abilities.

I sit with the shadow cat, stroking its fur. I should feel vindication, relief, even joy at having exacted my vengeance on Ravenna, and at having survived the games. I don't feel any of those things. I still feel like I'm being used by the city. Controlled in a way that I don't like.

After a little while a figure comes and sits in in the pen with us. I'm surprised to find it's Rowan. He doesn't normally come down here.

“I didn't feel like staying at the party,” he says. “I don't have much to celebrate. Do you mind if I stay?”

I shake my head. I don't want to speak, but Rowan's presence is comforting. We're both the same in a lot of ways. We both have the iron ring around our neck that signifies our status as slave gladiators. Neither one of us wants to be forced to be a part of all this. And looking at Rowan, it's easy to remember just how close we were once.

We sit there together. Nothing more than that, but it's enough. His presence near me is a comfort, and it's almost enough to let me forget that soon I will have to fight in another set of games.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:24 am

It's a day or two before Lady Elara comes to see me at Ironhold. She has me brought to her in a largely empty chamber, high up in the fortress. It's a place I've met her in before but this is a big change to what we have been doing. She has brought me out of Ironhold usually, to meet her down in the temple to Deira, below the city streets.

She looks uneasy as I enter, even though she sits composed upon a couch of dark wood and soft fabric.

“What is it?” I ask her. “Is something wrong?”

She nods. “I thought I should be the one to tell you. As of this morning, I'm not your sponsor anymore. Others with deeper pockets have outbid me.”

“But they can't do that,” I say. “I don't want a different sponsor.”

“What you want, what either of us wants, doesn't count for anything in this context,” Lady Elara says.

I wince at that, all too aware of the weight of the collar around my neck. I am a prisoner of the system here in Aetheria, and I get no choice in so many things, including potentially whether I live or die.

“How can someone outbid you?” I ask. “I thought you were one of the wealthiest people in the city?”

“One of,” she says. She looks uncomfortable again. “But there are others who can outbid me in these things, and I'm not sure which of them has laid claim to you yet.”

“Does this mean we won't be able to keep training?” I ask, knowing the answer even as I say it.

Lady Elara nods. “At least for now. But you already have the power you need within you, Lyra. You just need to practice with it and embrace it. You also need to remember the point of what we're doing. We have the capacity to change the empire, for all our kind. We can have an emperor who will allow us to live openly, who will treat the people of the empire well.”

“You're talking about a coup?” I say.

“It's what's needed,” Lady Elara insists. “You need to keep fighting within the Colosseum, and you need to gain the respect and love of the crowd. When the moment comes, we will need them on our side. I will keep working outside it, as will all the others. I truly believe that if we keep going, we can make a difference.”

She sounds so certain and so passionate about that that it's easy to get swept up in the feeling that we might be able to change the empire, to make it into something fairer, something where beast whisperers are able to live openly and the poorest are not treated so cruelly. But she's speaking openly about deposing the emperor now.

“Who would be emperor afterwards?” I say. “You?”

“Do you not think I would be a better choice?” Lady Elara says.

I don't know. I know that the emperor is cruel, maybe even mad, but what would Lady Elara do that is truly different? Would she shut down the games? Would she release the slaves? She hasn't said that she would do either.

But honestly what choice do I have other than to do what she's suggested anyway? Keep fighting in the Colosseum? If I don't, I'll die. Gain the love of the crowd? I've

seen with everything that happened with Ravenna, just how important that can be as well. I must do what she wants, whereas I must trust that Lady Elara won't simply change her mind.

She stands, briefly taking my hand in hers. "Remember when the time comes that you have the greatest potential of all our kind. I might not be able to contact you but I will be watching. Do whatever you need to do to survive, Lyra. You will be free after this, I promise."

She heads for the door. I have lost my patron, and I don't know who my new one will be. It might be some noble who just wants to be seen around me now that I have succeeded in the Champions Trials. I hope that's all it is, and it isn't a noble who has decided they want me as the kind of plaything that Lady Elara has only pretended I am for my protection. Suddenly, the rumors that have protected our secret as beast whisperers don't seem such good protection after all.

Who will my new patron be? What will they demand of me? I know that a patron can require anything of me, might order me into their bed, might order me punished, might parade me around their friends.

Fear fills me at the prospect, but I have no choice. For as long as the system of the games continues, none of us will have any choice.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:24 am

I return to training, working alongside Alaric, Rowan and a few of the others. Alaric pauses in our training shortly after Rowan and I finish a practice bout.

“I want to suggest something,” he says, looking to the pair of us. “Lyra and I are already allies, but I think the three of us should all be allies.”

That's a big offer from him. In this place friendship is one thing but declaring an alliance means looking out for one another, being willing to fight by each other's side, being willing to put our lives on the line for one another.

“I didn't think you liked me,” Rowan says.

“And you don't much care for me,” Alaric retorts. “But that doesn't stop us from looking out for one another, and I trust that you will do all you can to keep Lyra safe. That's enough.”

Rowan looks thoughtful. “I thought it was the likes of Vex who had little coteries of allies.”

“A smaller group by the day,” Alaric says.

That's true. Vex has only a few friends around him now. He still has status as one of the noble gladiators, and is one of the survivors of the Champions Trials, but Ravenna is dead, Malira is dead, and it must be starting to look to others that hanging out with him is not safe.

“An alliance makes sense for us, Rowan,” I say. “We can look out for one another.”

“Until the day you're both out of here,” Rowan points out. “You're up to four seasons now, Alaric.”

“My aid for even one more would be of use, wouldn't it?” Alaric points out. “And such an alliance doesn't necessarily end because one person leaves Ironhold. You might benefit from an ally on the outside.”

Rowan looks thoughtful again. It's obvious he doesn't particularly want to be allies with Alaric. The two of them aren't friends even now, but this will help him, will help all of us.

“Very well,” he says, offering his wrist to Alaric. The two of them clasp wrists, and I put my hand into the mix. The three of us are far stronger together than apart.

“Lyra,” a trainer calls out. “Come this way.”

He has a couple of guards with him, making the seriousness of the command clear. I must go, leaving the others and following the trainer through Ironhold.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“It's time for you to meet your new patron,” the trainer says.

“Who is it?”

The trainer doesn't answer, just keeps walking said I must follow. My mind races with the possibilities. There are only so many nobles who are wealthy enough to outbid Lady Elara, and the question is why they would want to. What will they demand of me? How badly will I be punished if I try to refuse? When all is said and done, I don't have a choice in what I do here. Does one of them merely want to be associated with me, or do they want more?

We head up and up through the fortress, not to the same room that I met Lady Elara in, but to a different room in one of the higher towers. The door swings open as I approach, opened ahead of me by a guard. The room beyond is hung with silks in purple and gold, while the furniture is gilded wood, carved with scenes of figures entwined in what might be battle. Rich incense fills the air.

At the heart of it all is a gilded chair. And on that chair, waiting for me, is the emperor.