

## The Bloody Wolf

### **Chapter 1**

I staggered to my feet, blinking grit from my eyes.

“Give it up,” my opponent growled. “Stand still and you die quickly.”

Raising my sword, I side-stepped, balanced on the balls of my feet. Blood seeped down my bare belly and dripped onto the sand of the gladiatorial arena. He circled around me, grinning, his illegal dirk slicked red with my blood. My own sword had yet to mark him, and his confidence grew to match his bulk. Impossibly huge, he was one of the largest slaves to fight in the High King’s own home Grand Arena. His name was Silas, but he liked to style himself as Silas the Savage. As though the title would terrify and unman his opponents before entering the arena. If any had been terrified and unmanned, I never heard tell of it. I myself was unimpressed after hearing of him and even less so upon seeing him for the first time. Like many gladiators, Silas carried his brains in his muscles and thought himself invincible.

He wore, like me, a short leather kilt, armored leather boots to the knees and a fighting harness criss-crossing his massive hairy chest. Unlike me, he wore his hair short, with a close-cropped beard. Fierce blue eyes lit his triumphant grin, clearly visible through the

sweat and dirt in my eyes. In his home province of Nevalle, in the northern portion of the Federation, he was also a champion. With that title, he carried an ego bigger than he was.

The rules of the arena were simple: one man, one weapon. He had managed to conceal the dirk inside his left wrist and I was foolish enough to miss it. Many opponents thought that by killing me they not only inherited my title as reigning champion, they might also gain their freedom. The fact that I, reigning champion, was still as much a slave as they never entered their heads. So many have cheated, I learned long ago to assume they all would cheat. That I missed this one caused me to curse myself and bleed into my battle harness.

He had managed a clever feint that caught me by surprise, quite a feat considering his brain capacity. I saw the blade, too late to stop it, but managed to deflect it enough that the razor sharp blade stabbed deep, but not into a vital organ. Few, if any, in the stands had seen it, as his sword hilt crashed into my face and knocked me off my feet headfirst into the sand at the same moment.

Had the arbitrators seen the illegal second blade, they would have stopped the match. Silas would have faced execution by crucifixion posthaste and his owners heavily fined. Hence, I felt surprise that his owners would have dared such an attempt against me, the High King's own champion. Orders for the dirk had to have come down from on high to pass the many slave handlers to arrive on Silas's wrist. Unfortunately for me, the wound I took while not immediately mortal, may yet kill me. Yet, none except me, and the brainless hulk in front of me, knew it.

With a quick shake of my head, I cleared my vision. The crowds in the stands cheered and stomped their feet at my movement, screaming lustily. Most waved small banners carrying the emblem of their favorite: The White Lion of the High King, or the dark red Stallion of Nevalle. Far more Lions than Stallions fluttered amidst the cheering fans.

A few booed. No doubt, I thought dryly, from those who presumed to wager against me: the High King's own personal slave, the reigning champion, and the current hot favorite. Few in the Federation were foolish enough to bet against me. I sent the noise to the back of my head where it belonged, not letting the screams, cheers, or yells distract me from business.

"I hear they call you The Wolf," Silas said. He eyed me up and down, his grin widening. "I mistook you for a whelp still at his dam's tit."

He laughed at his own jest, a dry hoarse laugh that held only arrogance.

Without taking my eyes from him, I worked saliva into my dry mouth, bent, and spat blood and grit to the arena floor.

His eyes narrowed. "I'll tear you limb from limb, whelp," he rumbled.

You talk too much, I thought. A pity no one had whipped his handlers for allowing him his voice while fighting. Talking wasted energy and took one's mind off the business of killing and survival. Had I the inclination, I could have had his intestines around his throat before he finished his sentence.

He charged, fast, his sword raised high to strike at my head, his dirk in his left hand carried low, still concealed from most in the stands. I'm sure he hoped to catch me between the two blades. Rather than meet his rush or parry his sword, I fell back, and dropped to the sand. His forward momentum brought him down, where my feet caught him in the gut. I kicked out, sending Silas through the air, harmlessly over me, to land, hard, on his back. Judging by his gasps, I suspected I knocked the wind from him.

While Silas struggled to both get to his feet and get his wind back, I looked to my handlers. Cephas, my Slave Master, gestured subtly, a quick hand movement, instructing me to carry on. I could have killed Silas as he floundered up, helpless and coughing. Had I done so I faced a whipping for not putting on a better show. The fans in the stands wanted a good fight, not a fight that ended within the first round. Timing was everything for a champion. Thus, I couldn't kill him too soon. If I took too long to kill him, later I'd be whipped for cowardice.

Yet, I knew I would have to kill him before my own strength ran out. The straps of my battle harness thus far kept the lips of my wound together and limited the bleeding. I still bled, however, internally. The creeping weakness told me so. My own impending death did not disturb me much. I needed to win first.

Silas the Savage got his wind back and charged, his sword lifted to hack and kill. His own Slave Master was most likely signaling him to end the fight quickly, unwilling to risk a defeat. Bigger and stronger than me, he had as much skill and experience as I did. Without his brains entering the equation, the odds were nearly even.

Like me, his slave's collar bore encrusted jewels. The Duke of Nevalle, Lionel's chief political opponent, owned Silas. No doubt, the Duke intended a subtle insult, a social victory over the High King by killing me. If I killed Silas instead, the Duke not only lost face, but may also lose his own head. That was, if Lionel was feeling cranky.

Rather than meet his charge, I ducked and pivoted in the same motion. His weight carried him past, his sword missing me completely. My own sword slashed deep into his thigh. He fell with a guttural groan. The crowd roared.

I gave him a moment, then kicked him full in the face as he started to rise. He fell flat on his back, cursing through the blood filling his mouth. I could kick him all day long as long as I didn't kill him. I needed to kill him, but held back on the impulse. Past his struggling body, I saw Cephas make another quick gesture, one that both congratulated me and gave me permission to kill.

Silas spat blood and broken teeth, now fully enraged as a bull in rut and parted from his harem. This time I met his rush with my own. We hacked at each other, Silas wasting valuable energy and concentration by swearing while I merely focused on not letting him slaughter me.

My greater speed in thrusting past his guard began to annoy him at last. He lashed out with his boot and connected solidly with my groin. Definitely bad form, but it comes with the territory.

The crowd screamed in protest as red fire lanced from my groin, sending my lower body into an inferno. My breath caught on a curse, choking, as the agony spread. Before I could stagger out of reach, his sword pierced my belly, deep.

I twisted away, off his blade before he could drive it in deeper. This was getting out of hand, I thought. He would kill me before I could kill him, and I would have to face the gods of my ancestors defeated, shamed. If a stupid savage, with no more intelligence than the average marble statue, skewered me, it would haunt my soul in the afterlife. I would have to finish him before he finished me.

Blocking another savage slash, I danced out of reach. I spun my sword in a tight twirl, making the steel whistle as though it had a life of its own. Few could spin a sword as I could, though many tried to imitate the technique. Its shrill sound unnerved many of my opponents, creating a mind filled with unease or panic, and making them easy prey for The Wolf. Silas had not the wits to be unnerved.

He followed me, his sword swinging hard and fast. I caught it on my own heavy blade and turned it, but for the first time his strength overcame mine and I could only slow, not entirely deflect, the strike aimed to kill. His cross guard caught me a glancing blow above my left ear. Head ringing, I fell flat on my back. Grinning, he turned away in triumph. Yelling and cheering, the crowd saw what he did not: my struggles to rise once more. From the candle of his eye, he saw me and turned. He sneered.

“Aren’t you dead yet?”

Like a great cat he pounced, the sunlight glancing off his blade poised to slash and kill. Still on my knees, I lunged aside, rolling. He missed. Still bent to strike my form on the ground, he awkwardly tried to regain his balance. I uncoiled from my crouch and struck with all my speed, training, instinct.

I buried my sword to the hilt in his broad chest.

Shock filled his pale blue eyes as they stared into mine for a brief moment. I forcibly swallowed pity and regret that always accompanied the death of an adversary, for neither of us ever had a choice in the matter. I struck true, into his living beating heart. He died within a moment, collapsing boneless at my feet.

The stands went wild as I planted my foot on the corpse and yanked my sword free. Pampered, rich and spoiled, the citizens craved what the High King willingly provided. As a race, the Khalidians loved war and violence. Founded on this heinous attribute, the great Federation advanced her borders slowly, methodically, with every generation. When the countries to conquer ran out, the war-loving people turned on each other. Thus, a few hundred years ago the Arena Games began.

In the not so distant past, angry mobs have rioted when not provided their violent entertainment, creating their own sports in the streets. Like a tidal wave, screaming hordes have cut down troops and innocent civilians alike, set fires in the capital city of Soudan, and looted at will before either gradually subsiding or forcibly cut down. Killing was what these Khalidians wanted and killing was exactly what the High King gave them. The High Kings knew their people well. They loved bloodshed, violence and death. Each succeeding monarch gave it to them, in war on his neighbors and the conquest of new and sometimes distant lands. He provided in the Arena, in the blood sports, in the Games. Prisoners, criminals, slaves: all sent into the sands of the arena to face gladiators like Silas and me, or wild animals like lions, tigers or packs of starving, savage dogs.

Like his ancestors before him, Lionel cleverly kept the people yelling for blood...the blood of slaves, of prisoners, of animals, of criminals and of gladiators. They sought the spilling of an ocean of gore, yet not a drop of the purple blood of High Kings. It kept the violent citizens in the arena, not in the streets where they might conspire, then rise against him. The people gambled all they owned: coin, property, sometimes even their very souls on the Games. We gladiators were not always the main event. Trapdoors on the floor of the arena released the tigers, the lions, the savage packs of wild dogs, blood-maddened bulls with sweeping horns, all pitted against unarmed prisoners or slaves. The Games included not just executions of the hapless or the criminal, but also melees of war captives forced to fight other prisoners. All the day long, the carnage kept the bloodthirsty citizens right where His Majesty wanted them.

Blood kept them spending money, to line his royal coffers, and kept the people where he could watch them. The rich grew poor, the poor poorer. Like his sires, Lionel found no end of slaves and prisoners to fill the arenas in the wars to expand his vast Federation. He cast far and wide to bring in exotic creatures from distant lands to kill or be killed in the Great Arena. Any event he might create to tempt the masses into spending all they had. The banners purchased at the gates, the government-owned strings of betting shops, the tokens that allowed the spectators into the Great Arena itself all made Lionel a very wealthy and an extremely powerful man.

Covered in blood and bleeding, my sword dripping gore, I walked to my master's pavilion in the stands. About ten rods from the pavilion, I stopped, lifting my sword high. About twelve thousand

pairs of eyes watched me, half of what the Grand Arena could hold. The stomps, cheers, screams and whistles were nearly deafening. As I stood close enough to the stands, a rain of flower petals showered down from the more enthusiastic fans. They loved me, for I was their own, their favorite, their champion. I had never failed them, never failed to kill, never showed weakness or mercy. To them, I was everything the Federation represented: supreme, savage and a winner.

I swallowed my disgust, swallowed the insane urge to laugh in their jubilant faces, swallowed the horror of what I they forced me to do. Once more, I hid the rage, the daemon, I felt deep within my soul. Only the current knowledge that I would never have to kill for sport again kept me from screaming my fury into their shocked faces.

Expected to play to their lusty sensibilities, I waved my sword in triumph. I turned, giving all the chance to see their victor in his glory. The crowd went wild, their applause deafening. For the last time I saluted my master: my arms crossed over my chest, swordhilt in hand, and bowed low. I looked for him beneath the royal banners, and saw him: the frail, yet clever old man who owned me. Welcome to the glamorous, evil, virulent court of His Royal Majesty, Lionel Wilhelm, the Fourth of his name.

As was his wont, he paid scant attention to what occurred in the arena in front of his eyes. For him, the political arena and its cutthroat intrigues held him captivated. Yet, as I stood at parade rest and watched with a slave's carefully blank expression, I saw this day, at least, he was not intriguing. Rather, he was busy arguing with his son and heir apparent, Crown Prince Broughton, seated on his right.

Nicknamed Prince Brutal by his enemies, and some friends, he stared toward me unseeingly, his expression red and furious as his sire yelled over the noise of the crowd in his ear. Violent, impassioned gestures accompanied his words. I doubted even those nearest him could hear what he said.

As I could not leave without a dismissal, I stood, waiting, my pain growing with every moment. My blood, concealed within Silas' heart's blood on my chest and belly, seeped down into my boots. Death crept ever closer. Get on with it, I almost muttered. Let me go before I shamefully bleed to death here in front of the stands. Injured enough times, one learns to shunt pain and weakness aside and deal with the matter of survival. I grit my teeth and put my pain and weakness to the back, where they belonged.

I often took advantage of one of the few advantages of slavery, the ability to spy on my betters. Too often, a slave went seen and unseen, heard and not heard. I watched and listened. I learned and remembered. I waited. Blessed with exceptional eyesight, I saw details other might miss.

My head slightly bowed, I watched the royal party surreptitiously from beneath the oily hair over my eyes. Several of the Prince's six brothers flanked His Majesty, feigning boredom, as they no doubt tried to listen to the intense argument.

Brutal made no secret of his plans to slaughter his brothers upon ascending his father's throne. He wanted no challengers to his position and power. While they were unable to act openly against him, they doubtless hoped High King Lionel would kill the Crown

Prince himself. An open secret, Lionel made no effort to hide his hatred of his eldest son.

Brutal, no fool he, knew his own sire hated him, and his own brothers conspired against him. While not even the High King was above the law, Brutal took many murderous steps to ensure his survival. Surrounded by bodyguards, he seldom spent time alone. His food tasters died by the score. As did his enemies.

As I watched, Theodoric, High Priest of Usa'a'mah, the Khalidian god of war and death, also stood close, also pretending he wasn't trying to listen. I glanced covertly around at the others in the royal party. Several nobles and courtiers dressed in their robes of silk waved small fans to cool themselves of the oppressive late summer heat. They too listened and whispered behind their hands, gossiping, hatching small plots against one another. Behind these stood the court hangers-on, poorer folk to who groveled at the feet of the royal family and the nobles, hoping for favors and coins.

In the section to His Majesty's left sat Silas' owner, a distant cousin, both a Duke and a purple-blooded Prince in his own right. His own court surrounded him, his sons and daughters, vassals and lords. A quick glance at his furious expression told me Lionel probably knew he tried to cheat. His loss at my hands would cost him dearly both politically and in blood. If he could, he no doubt would have me murdered.

Several foreigners sat two tiers below Lionel and his brood, so obviously not of the Federation I cursed myself at not noticing them earlier. Despite the sultry heat, they dressed in not silks and robes, but rather in sleek vests of leather or fur, wide belts with

copper buckles and leather trousers. Boots strapped with fur rose to their knees, silver and gold spurs glinted at heels. Some of the women wore tiny vests and short leather skirts, leaving an interesting amount of female skin exposed. Others covered themselves with long cloaks of fine cloth, yet seemed unaffected by the heat. Slender thongs or delicate intricate chains bound many brows, keeping long flowing hair from their faces.

Not mode of dress for courtiers and noble and hangers-on, I suspected, even for foreigners. Warrior's garb. I saw swords sheathed at hips, daggers thrust through belts. Recurve horsebows slung from shoulders, with quivers of arrows bristling on their backs. Stern warrior expressions displayed no horror at the show with which Silas and I just entertained them. Though I did see thinly veiled disgust concealed beneath calm facades on more than a few. Did I see warriors who disliked the spectacle of killing? This interested me, and I looked closer. I focused on them without raising my head.

A few spoke amongst themselves, but most sat silent, observing not only the scene before them but also the audience in the stands that still cheered lustily and stomped their feet. Many a hand stroked a sword hilt or fingered their daggers, as though ever ready to start or finish a fight. A fierce race of warriors, I thought, observing the cool deadliness each carried with them. Even the women, as lightly built as they were, carried with them the lean and lethal air of hunting panthers.

Unlike the court nobility, their jewelry looked stark in contrast: gold and silver earrings worn by both men and women, armbands of copper and bronze, slender gold chains graced throats. Angular eyes

slanted from high cheekbones, their skin a soft bronze, a peculiar shade as though the gods dipped them in almond oil. Despite their evident familiarity with war and fighting, arena bloodshed was evidently not to their taste. I noticed many scowls, a few heads shaking in sorrow and regret, lips thinned in disgust. One big red-haired warrior wearing a gold torque of royalty looked from me to the corpse behind me, his face tight with anger. My eye roved to the one next to him.

Seated to the right and slightly below Prince Brutal, she watched me and saw me: the victorious gladiator and a slave. The Khalidians looked at me and saw a gladiator and a slave. Few looked and saw a man.

She saw me.

Me, the bloody Wolf. Her eyes traveled slowly from my booted feet to the top of my head, her eyes filled with an expression I could not read. It was not exactly horror or sympathy, but an odd mixture of both. Along with another emotion that escaped me.

By the gold torque gracing her throat, I recognized immediately who she must be. No doubt, she was the princess from Kel'Halla whom Broughton sought in marriage. I had heard rumors of the Kel'Hallans, the Horse Lords, knew they sought peace after years of war. Despite the hundreds of cohorts sent against the plains and hills of Kel'Halla, the Federation suffered defeat time and again. The swift Kel'Hallan cavalry repelled invasion, threw back into Lionel's teeth the triumph he craved. Lionel, rumors said, had grown obsessed with conquering Kel'Halla. He lost sleep, lost weight and perhaps his clever royal mind. So why, I asked myself, would they want a peace

treaty with the Federation? If they held on long enough, Lionel would be dead before he could conquer them. Obviously, the princess was the price of that peace.

I forgot my pain and impending death as I gazed at her, meeting her glance fully for a long moment. Beautifully emerald green, her large eyes angled slightly at the corners like those of her race. Her long hair, a soft red-gold, feathered at her brow tumbled about her shoulders and bosom. Lean and tough, she reminded me of a she-wolf: savage and beautiful. Girded with both bow and sword, knives protruding from each boot top, she moved with deadly grace and a warrior's keen quick economy.

My breath caught on a sigh. For a brief moment, I broke my own rule of never wishing for the unattainable and wondered what it would be like to be a free man and possess the love of such a woman. Ly'Tana. Her name was as beautiful as she.

Reality closed with a rush as Lionel finally noticed me and gestured my dismissal. His argument with Brutal had ended with Brutal turning his back on his royal father and storming away. Some shocked looks and a few sly snickers followed his angry back. Saluting again, I turned to walk away. I cast the wild exotic princess from my mind, albeit with difficulty, and focused on the matter at hand. Like walking a straight path back to the barracks with head held high and a proud, confident step.

Despite my discipline, I still bled and my pain increased. I gave in to neither as I marched past the roaring stands. More ardent fans cast flowers and fragrant rose petals down over me, a custom reserved only for the very best gladiators. I learned long ago to never

allow the public's adoration of me go to my head. Outside of suicide, it was the swiftest way to death.

Slave Master Cephas was not in his usual place to look me over for wounds and take charge of me, as was his duty. Nor did I see any other slave handlers about. I didn't bother to ponder the lack, I only felt gratitude they weren't there. Only a few fellow gladiators murmured their congratulations while refusing to meet my eyes. We had an unspoken rule among us slaves: never look a dead man in the face. We were all dead. We just did not know when.

Scattered nearby, more sports fans and court hangers-on slapped me on the back, or reached out to touch me for luck, yelling their adoration. Among them, yet alone, one caught my glance: a slender blonde man who eyed me sharply as I went by. A vague memory of having seen him somewhere around the High King's court touched my mind. Then I promptly forgot him.

The corridors beneath the arena drummed with the incessant pounding from the stands above. Strangely empty, I wondered if Cephas and the handlers were busy investigating the earlier debacle of Silas's illegal dagger, for I suspected Cephas hadn't missed it. His keen eyes missed little.

I breathed in the familiar odors of mildewed stone, damp wood and my own blood as I walked back to my tiny cell. As the High King's personal gladiator and reigning champion, I was entitled to a small chamber of my own under the Grand Arena. The other slaves slept and spent their few free moments in the barracks just off the training arena, a block away.

Weakness washed through me and I paused a moment to lean on my sword. The sword no handler was available at the door to take from me. With my escape so close, I ignored the threat of punishment for having a weapon in my possession while not under supervision or in the arena. At once, dizziness and nausea swamped me.

My freedom was so close. So close. I leaned against the damp stone wall for a moment. Sweat poured down my face and neck. I felt it drip down my chest and itch my back.

Beneath the slowly dying thrumming from the fans above, I heard the howling of wolves. I brought my head up sharply, listening. Wolves. They could not be in Soudan, of course. No wolf would be stupid enough to enter the busy, teeming capital. I heard them clearly in my head. Howling wolves had haunted my sleep for years uncounted, wild packs racing under the light of the moon in my dream's visions. Rarely did I hear them while awake and alert. Yet I surely heard them now. They sounded as though they sang a mere furlong away.

“You there. Gladiator.”

A voice shouted from behind me and the wolfish cacophony fell silent. I sighed. No doubt, here came a handler to take my blade. I turned obediently, head down, eyes on the ground as a slave should when confronted by a free man. Half expecting a scolding for having a sword in my possession, I heard his next words with surprise.

“You are injured. Let me help you.”

I studied him with quick flicking glances, never looking at him fully. Not a slave handler, I found. With a sharp jolt, I

remembered him as the blonde man who watched me pass outside. He stood a head shorter than I, and was slender with a muscular athlete's build. I recognized a man who might be as at home on the battlefield as he would a dance floor. A small diamond chip studded his left earlobe. A thick wealth of wheat-colored hair tumbled over his head. Yellow eyes. I found it odd to see someone with eyes that exact shade of amber. Almost like a cat's, if his pupils had been vertical.

His well-chiseled features were handsome, with an aquiline nose and thin aristocratic lips. He wore a torque of gold, not a slave's collar. The only collar a prince would wear. A plain brown tunic and gold breeches covered his broad shoulders and well-muscled legs. Silk. A light cloak of gold trimmed in scarlet hung from his broad shoulders. A fine leather belt with a gold buckle embraced his hips. A fine sword with jeweled hilt hung in a tooled leather scabbard. A man of means, I surmised, likely a nobleman of a very high rank.

I also took in at a glance the slight raggedness of the edge of his cloak, a few stains on his shirt, the bristle of an unshaven chin. I also noticed the look of faint desperation deep in those amber eyes. Perhaps a nobleman somewhat down on his fortunes, I guessed. He still managed to look elegant, however. I guessed he would look elegant while dressed in tattered rags.

I did not want his help, yet I could not refuse or refute him. A slave had no rights. I smelled my freedom, felt it with every beat of my pulse. I could not allow him to interfere. Thoughts of how I might put him off ran through my mind and I dismissed each one as unworkable.

He appeared to be studying me in turn. I hoped my thick hair, oily with sweat, covered enough of my brow and eyes that he saw little of importance.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“No name, Highness.”

He snorted. “Oh, that’s right. Slaves have no names. I forgot.”

His words and tone gave me enough courage to raise my head and look at him closer. He was not looking at me, but to the side, his thin lips twisted into a bitter line. By his words and accent, he was not local.

He turned back to me. “Look, my name is Rygel of Khassart. What do they call you, even if you have no name?”

“Wolf, Highness.” I answered slowly. “The Wolf, sometimes.”

“Appropriate name,” he commented. “I watched you fight.”

His gold eyes dropped to my torso, his gaze knowing. I knew I must get away from him and to my cell. He knew too damn much by half.

“Highness.” I dropped my head and turned away.

Rygel caught my shoulder before I walked two strides.

“Wait. You need help.”

Emboldened by his manner, I brushed his hand from my shoulder. “I need nothing.”

“I’ve seen wounds like that before. You’ll die without help.”

I half-turned to him, a smile twisting my own lips into something that I knew held no warmth or humor. My death. My freedom. Rygel drew back from my smile, his eyes widening.

“Gods,” he whispered. “You can’t.”

“Leave me be.”

He stepped toward me and I did the unthinkable. I raised the sword still dripping with Silas the Savage’s blood. The deadly point, on a level with those oddly amber eyes, meant only one thing. Had anyone seen that gesture, that raised blade, meant my imminent execution by extreme and nasty torture. If Rygel knew that, his expression did not show it. Surprised, but strangely unafraid, Rygel lifted his hands in a surrender gesture and backed away.

“Don’t be stupid, man,” he said.

His treatment of me as an equal unsettled me enough that I turned and walked away as quickly as my weakness would allow. I did not look back.

In the privacy of my cell, I shut the door and staggered to the narrow cot. A small table, a chair, and the cot were all the furniture the tiny room held. A slave owned nothing. Not even his life. My fingers trembling, I unbuckled my battle harness, leaving me naked save the thin leather breeches and my knee-high boots.

Leaving the rest on, I sat on the cot and leaned thankfully against the dank wall. Colored lights, red, green, and gold, shot behind my closed lids when I shut my eyes. I felt my death near. Briefly, I thought back to the Seven Gods of my homeland. Would they send their messenger to deliver my spirit to the stars? Or, had they abandoned me when I crossed the border all those years ago? I

believe they had. I paid lip-service to the Khalidian Blood God, Usa'a'mah, when required, but never worshiped him. Perhaps he would take me as his own, since I did his work so well.

Blood trickled from my wounds now the harness set the river free. Arianne, my Arianne, I thought, despair sneaking past my triumph. I wanted to free you, save you, but I failed. I am so very sorry. Can you ever forgive me?

The door opening snapped my eyes open. A slave could not bar his door either, I remembered sourly. Rygel watched me, half-hiding behind the door in case I still waved the sword. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he grinned.

“You’re a proper nuisance,” I said.

He shrugged. “And your point is?”

He eyed the sword still in my hand and raised a half-salute, mocking. He opened the door wider and came in as though walking into the den of a dangerous animal was commonplace.

Taking the single chair, he turned it around and straddled it, leaning his arms across the back. “Why won’t you let me help you? I can save your life.”

I grinned slightly, making a small gesture to the blood pooling on the cot. “You’re too late anyway. No one can save me.”

He lifted his hands and waggled his fingers. “I’m a wizard. I can heal with magic. Save one even nigh unto death itself.”

Bloody hell, I thought. “What are you doing here? In the Federation, I mean.”

Rygel grimaced. “It is a long story, my friend. One day I’ll tell it to you. Perhaps over a hanap of ale.”

“Thanks all the same, but I sincerely doubt I’ll be here.” “Are you sure? It’s a good story.”

“I’m certain it is, but I already have plans.”

His treating me as an equal unsettled me to no end. Not even my fellow gladiators treated me on the same level.

He sighed. “As you are bent on refusing my most wonderful and charming company and an even better cup of ale, I’ll have to resort to other, less savory, methods of persuasion.

My eyes narrowed of their own accord. “What are you talking about?”

“I truly do hate the rough stuff,” he said with a dramatic mournfulness in his tone. Yet, his amber cat’s eyes gleamed with mischief, a combination that spoke volumes and meant trouble for me. His aristocratic lips twitched. “All that suffering and whining and blood.” He shuddered delicately.

“Get to the point,” I growled.

He sniffed. “I can see you’re no fun at all. Why I should bother with you is beyond me.”

“Then go away and leave me alone.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. It’s against my religion.”

I flipped him an obscene gesture, one I learned long ago usually set the Khalidians into a frothing rage. Rygel grinned.

“Since we’ve been conversing so politely together,” he drawled. “I happened to notice the leak you’ve sprung leached out another pint or so of that oh so important red stuff.”

“So?”

“Well,” he said dryly, settling his chin on his arms. “I think I’m going to wait until you pass out from blood loss and then heal you. Oh, please, no worries, I have time. And patience. Patience is a virtue, or so I’ve heard.”

Pursing his aristocratic lips, he raised his eyes to the ceiling as if seeking answers there. “I’m guessing one or two more minutes before you’re out cold. What do you think?”

Stunned, I stared at him. “You wouldn’t.”

He barked a laugh, a sound with no humor. “I’ve also been told I’m a scoundrel with few morals. I would.”

“I could kill you the moment you healed me. Would you risk that?”

That provoked a grin and a mild shrug of the broad shoulders. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, friend.”

I sneered. “Maybe you’re lying. Prove to me you’ve got magic.”

Rygel rolled his eyes, raising his hands upward toward heaven. “Lords above, grant me patience. He’s dying and he wants parlor tricks.”

Sighing, he dropped his hands to his lap. “Very well.”

He flattened his palm, lifting it to eye level, and suddenly a bright flame danced merrily on his right hand. “Parlor tricks.”

A moment later, the flame danced across nothingness and lit upon his other hand. He quirked brow at me over the fire. “More?”

Suddenly the flame divided, splitting apart yet growing until all ten of his fingers held tiny merry flames. “Not enough?” The chair upon which he sat rose slowly, lifting him and all the fires toward the ceiling. “How droll.”

Before I could blink, the sword in my hand vanished, leaving my hand to grasp only air. It reappeared with no warning hilt down, deadly point up, under Rygel's floating backside. He risked the blade splitting him asunder should his magic fail and gravity take possession of him. The sword would break out at the top of his head. I know I gawked, despite my attempt to control my jaw.

"I could turn you into a toad," he remarked, closely examining his flaming fingernails. "But that would kill you instantly. A toad could not sustain injuries like that and live. I have to wonder how it is you're still alive."

The sword winked out and in its place a chamber pot sat, reeking a foul miasma that made my eyes water.

"Enough."

My hand suddenly gripped the sword again and Rygel floated serenely back to the floor. The flames winked out.

"Just so you know," he drawled, a faint smile touching his lips and making his yellow eyes dance. "You haven't the speed it would take to kill me."

I stared, completely baffled. "Why do you want to help me?"

Pain killed the merriment I saw in his cat's eyes. "Let's just say I'm looking for redemption."

I laughed, a sharp bark that turned into a cough. I tasted blood, felt the dizziness and nausea creep closer. "Find your redemption elsewhere. Go save a prostitute."

"Prostitutes have their pimps. You have me."

"Slaves have nothing. Not names, not lives. We are worthless."

“No human life is worthless,” Rygel replied calmly. “You know that. All life is sacred.”

As much as I wanted to disagree, I did know it. I knew it every time I killed a fellow slave in the arena. I cut my eyes away from his.

“You are worth saving,” he went on. “I know things...you are one of the few decent human beings in this Federal shit pile. I knew it the moment I saw you out there.”

“Save me for what?” I growled. “Save me for a longer life as a slave?” I fingered the leather collar and the jewels, marking me as the High King’s property. “Death is the only escape I’ll ever know.”

“If you want to die so badly, why didn’t you let that monster kill you? One wrong move, one mistake, and it would’ve been done with.”

I curled my lip. “I still have my pride. Here I can go out a champion.” I gestured about me at the walls. “Here, I can die quietly. Privately. Not for their entertainment.” I spat. Red tinged the spittle that struck the dirt floor.

I coughed again, cold and pain stabbing through my gut. Not long now, I thought. Looking down at myself, I studied the long gash just under my ribcage. No doubt, the blade nicked my lung. Blood still oozed, thickly, slowly. The other wound in my belly, from the Savage’s dirk, was nearly as bad, but had almost stopped bleeding. Glancing back up, I squinted through the growing dizziness at Rygel.

“You still haven’t given me reason enough to let you work your – your magic.”

He ran his hands through his wheaten hair, frustrated. “Perhaps I can buy you from the High King, set you free –“

I laughed and choked on it. I turned my left shoulder toward him slightly, showing him my mark, a tattoo of a Crowned Lion eating a unicorn. He eyed my brand, the High King's personal royal emblem. A scar from an opponent's dagger a long time ago made the Lion's snarl into a ragged sneer. "Once branded a slave, one is never unbranded."

"Lionel likes me," he said. "I'll agree to do anything he asks, then smuggle you from here—"

"His ruthless Majesty will not let me go."

"Damn you, let me try!" he snapped. "You must have something worth living for."

I grew colder. Arianne. Like me, a slave. Perhaps she was even dead by now, if the gods are merciful.

The chill increased, making me shiver. I suspected if I looked over my shoulder, I might see Usa'a'mah's angel of death standing there. Patient. Waiting. Cold. I did not look.

Blood seeped slowly, soaking into my cot. Weakly I brushed my hair out of my eyes, seeing two Rygels, then three as my vision blurred.

"Please, Wolf," he murmured. "There's hope, even for a slave."

"Wha—what do you know of slavery?" I snarled.

Rygel stood so abruptly the chair slammed to the floor. His lips drew back in a fierce grimace, his teeth bared. "I am as much a slave as you."

"Liar," I whispered. I had no strength for further anger. "You wear gold and silk."

From his belt pouch, he pulled a small vial. “You know what this is?” He waved it in my face. “It’s tros.”

I knew of it. Many nobles of the court, even members of the royal family, used it for its pleasant and erotic sensations. Brutal certainly did. I heard it helped make one as lusty as a stallion teased by a mare in season. Rumors blossomed like wild ivy vines around the palace, tales of tros parties that resulted in great erotic orgies, whereby groups coupled in twos and threes and even fours. Unwanted pregnancies abounded closely on the heels of such parties, resulting in frantic races to witch doctors for the poisons that would kill the growing problems. It was also highly addictive. Men have died horrible deaths if they no longer took the tros. I had heard an untold number of stories of those that suicided, unable to cope with the symptoms of withdrawal.

“I was betryesd,” Rygel went on, his voice hoarse. “By a woman – a woman I loved.” He barked a harsh cawing sound, a sardonic laugh. “By all the gods, how I loved her. She was my life, the song my soul sang to the gods above. I would have killed, or died, for her. Without my knowledge, she fed me small doses of tros, a tiny bit at a time. She put it in my wine, in my food, all with sweet words, with the luscious temptations of her body. I took all, paying no heed to the odd taste while her luminous eyes watched me.

“One day, I found I could not live without it. That was when I discovered the truth. She was Brutal’s pet. His agent. She turned me over to him, and left without a backward look.” His voice broke, choked. His face turned aside, away from me, for a long moment.

I waited, patient. What had I but time?

He turned back after a long agonized moment and continued, facing me finally. A bitter smile twisted his aristocratic lips. “Brutal freely gives me all I need, supplies me with women....” His voice trailed off, choked by despair and humiliation. “Now I am his creature, forced against my will to do his bidding. If I refuse, I die.”

His face flushed with shame and bitterness and self-loathing, he found courage enough to look me in the face. Tears glimmered in the cat’s eyes. “Lionel’s vile offspring made me his chief torturer. Perhaps you may remember Baron, Lord Kaine of Tintalgele?”

A lord of a minor House in the north, Baron Kaine humiliated Prince Brutal in the Royal Council of Lords by refusing to sign Brutal’s petition for more taxes and taking half the Council members with him. A fisherman working his trade found what was left of Baron Kaine floating in the River Soare, half-eaten by fish, his face green and purple.

“He was but the first.” Rygel went on. “I didn’t kill that poor wretch. I silenced his screams while I tortured him with magic. Brutal finally throttled him in a fit of temper.”

He looked down at his hands, turning them over as he studied them. They looked like strong ordinary hands from where I sat, even if the nails appeared gnawed on. “These hands were born to heal. The magic in them is healing magic. I’ve nursed the sick, the wounded, and brought an end to suffering. Against my codes of honor, I used my knowledge of healing and human anatomy to cause agony.

“Pray forgive me if I sound egotistical, but I am one of the most powerful wizards ever born. While there are many of us, few can

match me. Using magic can make one exhausted, but with me only healing magic can wear me down. I can level this city with a thought.”

“Why don’t you then?”

He smiled slightly. “Despite all, there are innocents here. Brutal owns me, but he doesn’t own my soul.”

Inwardly cursing, I fought against unwilling sympathy. Another wretch victimized by Lionel’s foul eldest child. He was but one among hundreds, thousands. Why should I allow him to interfere? What was he to me? My death, my freedom, called to me in a strident voice. I yearned to be free.

Gods above and below, his words haunted me. Friend. He called me friend. None since I was nine years old had anyone ever called me friend. Holy Seven, help me, I pryesd, though I hadn’t pryesd to them in a very long time.

Before I knew, or found the will to stop, what I was doing, I let the sword drop from my hand. I nodded.

“Do what you will,” I murmured. “Gods help both of us, you bastard.”

Rygel dashed the back of his hand across his eyes and chuckled. “I am that too.”

“Wh - what?”

“A bastard. Base born.”

What do I care what side of the sheets you were born on? Whether I gave voice to that opinion or held it silent, I’ll never know. I shut my eyes as he dropped to one knee beside me. His fingers gently probed the huge gash beneath my ribs. I caught my breath as another wave of pain stabbed through me. Rygel muttered under his

breath, curses, or prayers I could not hear. The dizziness grew and consumed me. Through my half-shut eyes, his wheaten hair seemed to glow with an odd nimbus.

“Hold tight,” Rygel said through gritted teeth. “I’ll have you dancing again in no time.”

My world exploded in fire and pain.