

THE FLAVIAN, ROMA MATER

Chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk.

Wheels rattled and the roof above Thyatis' head split open, flooding the stone shaft with sunlight. The platform beneath her feet shuddered and creaked as it rose up, iron pulleys squeaking. Sound flooded the shaft as she ascended, a booming rolling roar that made the air shudder. Thyatis flexed her arms and legs, seeing them shine with oil, rolling back and forth on the balls of her feet. She knew what made the sound and it filled her with an unexpected thrill. She checked the twine tying back her hair, the snugness of her loincloth and breast-band.

Sunlight touched the crown of her head and then she rose through the floor of the arena at the heart of the Flavian. The wooden doors covering the elevator fell back onto the sand. Her sudden appearance in the center of the great oval was greeted with a low roar of applause. Thyatis blinked in the sunlight. It was early and only half of the marble seats were filled. Still, tens of thousands clapped hand to shoulders as the platform rattled to a halt. She raised her hand, greeting the crowd.

Jeers and shouts met her gesture. Thyatis turned, surveying the arena. All around her other trap doors were swinging open. She stepped away from the platform.

The nearest elevator clanked to a halt and a woman in rags stood up, staring around in horror. Thyatis raised an eyebrow, seeing that the next platform had also stopped. This one deposited a very large, angry looking lion. It was a magnificent beast, tall as a woman at the shoulder, with a heavy dark mane and tawny pelt. The lion was blinking in the sun, puzzled by the noise. *Lions again*, she thought, becoming very still. *But no high grass!*

At a glance, she guessed that there were sixteen women and sixteen beasts; more lions, a handful of bears, some scrawny leopards and a pack of wild dogs. She assumed, watching the animals stare around, growling and yipping, that they had been starved, perhaps baited with human blood. Diana grinned in relief, seeing that an elevator to her left had delivered a spear. Moving softly to avoid drawing the attention of the angry black bear just beyond, she stepped to the weapon and picked it up. It felt good in her hands, a smooth ashwood shaft tipped with eight inches of polished iron.

A great shout echoed from the walls of the Flavian, distracting Maxian for a moment. He was pacing along a wooden roof circling the top of the arena. The roof was forty feet wide and served as a preparation area for the big canvas sails that shaded the seats below. The prince stepped to the edge, one booted foot on the lip, and looked down onto an oval of sand a hundred and forty-eight feet below. Black dots ran on the sand, chased by other black dots. The crowd was howling with laughter. To Maxian, his hair blown sideways by the breeze, it sounded like the surf on a rocky shore.

All of the people in the seats seemed very small and insignificant, like ants. Maxian turned away and resumed his measured pacing. The sailors handling the canvas awning ignored him. Some of Gaius Julius' men followed him at a distance, keeping watch. The old Roman had begun to accumulate retired soldiers and barbarian

mercenaries. Such men were easy to find in Rome. Maxian did not think he needed bodyguards, but Gaius ignored his protests.

The prince began a soft chant, a little mnemonic to keep pace and measure the distance around the oval. As he walked, he dropped tiny copper beads onto the planks, grinding them under his heel to fix them in place.

Maxian ignored the heat and the noise of the crowd. The fragile pattern around the people in the stands was far more important. It was almost drowned by the shuddering power bound into the stone, sand and wood of the building. Bound by centuries of blood sacrifice.

The black-maned lion crashed to earth, throwing down one of the running women. Her scream choked off as powerful jaws bit through her neck, splintering bone. Blood splattered across the white sand and the lion roared in anger, shaking the suddenly limp body. It didn't understand why the creature that smelled so good tasted so bad. The corpse flew away and the lion turned, blazing yellow eyes blinking.

Thyatis sprinted in, shouting. Blood streaked her side, oozing from four long parallel cuts left by a leopard's claw. The spear, slick with blood, was in her hands. Snarling, the lion reared, batting at her with giant paws. The spear punched into its chest, ashwood flexing with the blow, and Thyatis gritted her teeth, feeling the point grind across bone and then slip wetly between ribs. The lion screamed, a long wail of pain and staggered aside. The spear was wrenched from her hands as the beast toppled over.

The lion thrashed on the ground, blood gouting from the wound. Rolling over, the spear broke, drawing another howl of anguish. The lion staggered up, then fell over on one side, panting heavily. Thyatis wiped sweat from her brow, continuing to chant. With each kill, she urged the spirits of the dead on, to placate the gods, and grant her friends swift passage into the golden fields beyond the dark river.

"Help me!" A cry drew her attention. Thyatis turned, seeing the pack of wild dogs circling closer, driving a woman in a brief tunic towards her. The woman's skin was dark as fine ebony and she had snatched up a sword. She held it in both hands, keeping it between herself and the nearest dog. The pack was crouching low, slinking over the sand, ready to dart in and catch her ankle or knee in sharp teeth. Thyatis looked around, ignoring the woman.

"Please, help me!"

Three of the female lions were still alive and had found each other. Now they were hunting in a pack, confused by the thick smells and the massive sound that reverberated from the amphitheatre walls. In the stands, the matinee crowd was in a cheerful mood. They had waited a long time to see the games again and the usual sad spectacle of slaves or criminals driven before the beasts was proved unexpectedly amusing. The bears and leopards were dead, along with most of the women. Only Thyatis and the Nubian were left.

"Give me the sword," Thyatis shouted, rushing the nearest dog. The Nubian looked wildly over her shoulder, then tossed the blade – a Legion-issue gladius – to the red-headed woman. Thyatis caught it out of the air in a deft motion, then leapt sideways. The first dog had bolted back from her movement, but the pack itself had turned, yelping. The gladius slashed down, shearing through the muzzle of the nearest dog. It yelped, then staggered away, pawing at its ruined nose. The others bolted, but Thyatis was quick,

catching the slowest dog and hamstringing it. Crying mournfully, the dog tried to drag itself away, but the gladius punched down, severing its spine.

The Nubian woman backed up, finding a spear on the ground. Thyatis darted towards her. The pack circled again, yipping in high-pitched anger.

“Spear,” Thyatis barked and the Nubian woman threw her the weapon. It was lighter than the one she had lost in the lion, but it would do. The gladius slipped into the side of her loincloth, pressing tight against oil slick skin.

Just after dawn, the guards had hustled Diana out of her cell and into the baths at the northern end of the Flavian. Two slaves had scrubbed her down, even washing her hair with an eye-stinging soap. Thyatis hadn’t minded the rough treatment – it had been weeks since she had been clean. When they oiled her, she was alarmed. The oil was not the usual sweet lemony scent dispensed in the baths and gymnasiums of the city. It was rank and musky, like a cat in heat.

“Keep behind me,” Thyatis advanced on the dogs, keeping the three lionesses in her field of vision. They were tearing at a dead body sixty feet away, growling and snapping at the air. The dogs were a greater concern in this frozen instant of time. “Pick up any weapon you can.”

The Nubian nodded, gulping, but controlling her fear.

Another roar of delight rose up from below as Maxian completed his circuit. He knelt, hands gentle on either side of the copper bead. Each metal orb had been drawn from the same ingot, spun in heated air and formed into equal weights. That had not really been a sorcerer’s job, but being able to manipulate temperature had made it very easy. The prince touched a finger to the bead and felt the chiming echo of its siblings. Maxian let the shape and pattern of the Flavian take shape in his thought.

The amphitheatre loomed over the center of the city, instantly recognizable. For the tens of thousands of barbarians and foreigners passing through the Imperial capital each year, it was a symbol of the Empire. More, it stood at the middle of the city, square between four of the seven hills. Once, in an earlier age, the focal point of Nero’s Golden House had rested here. Now it was the heart of urban Rome.

Maxian, feeling the play of power in the building, knew it for the heart of the Empire as well. His brother Galen might be the symbol of the State, the living divine Emperor, but this place was the keystone of the pattern sustaining the Empire itself.

In every town and city throughout the Empire, there were replicas of this arena. The ceremonies that acclaimed the Empire, the Senate, the People, the City, were conducted here and there, like and like. In all those places the power and majesty of Rome was made flesh, manifest and unavoidable. Here, on the white sand, the lifeblood of criminals and traitors was spilled. There, in the provinces, the amphitheatre was Rome. Only citizens could sit in the marble seats, enjoying the games, watching barbarian slaves and wild animals driven to their destruction. In each death, the glory of the State was reinforced and the triumph of civilization over barbarism reaffirmed.

The prince breathed out slowly, letting his mind settle. This was something he had never attempted before, an act of such delicate nature that he put aside the humming power flowing within him, part and parcel of his sinew and bone, since Vesuvius. The constant muttering and whispering was shut away. Bit by bit, carefully, he began to

disassemble the matrices and forms that protected his living body from the onslaught of the Oath.

There were only four dogs left and they slunk away, growling.

“Ready with another spear,” Thyatis called over her shoulder.

“Ready!” The Nubian woman had a good arm. It made everything much easier.

Thyatis sprinted at the dogs, shrieking. The sound echoed back at her from the marble wall circling the arena floor. The dogs had had enough and they bolted, yelping in fear. She turned her body, still running, and threw in a single graceful motion. The spear plunged into the body of the largest dog with a gelid *slap*. Howling in pain, the dog crashed to the ground. It tried to rise, whining and licking at the blood welling up from matted fur.

Turning, Thyatis caught the second spear. She grinned at the Nubian woman, getting a pale grimace in return. Then Thyatis froze, the spear half-raised. The lionesses were padding up behind the Nubian, heads low, tongues tasting the air. The black woman froze as well, seeing Thyatis pause.

“Lie down, slowly.” Diana found her footing, spear at her shoulder.

The first lioness bolted forward in complete silence, haunches and paws blurring over the sand. Diana felt her nostrils flare. Muscles burning with effort, she ran forward, the spear firmly held at her waist.

The Nubian woman pressed herself to the sand, hands curled over her neck.

Pale shades of blue faded from the air with the last of Maxian’s shield. He sat, legs crossed, at the southern edge of the amphitheatre, high above the Imperial box. Far below, his brother was attending the games, sitting in regal splendor under a crimson canopy, his wife Helena doubtless at his side. Maxian calmed his thoughts and let desire flow away. It was very difficult to remain still, to hold an image of a quiet pool foremost in his mind. He strove to banish all intent from himself.

The power of the Oath curdled around him, shimmering darkly in the wooden planks, in the marble statues of the gods, in grains of sand far below. A tendril, rich with destruction, flowed across him. The prince struggled to keep the pool calm and serene. Flight or resistance would mean destruction in the instant it would take to raise his wards and barriers. He lay open to the power of the Oath, here in the very crucible. It lapped up against him, flowed over him.

It was like ice, freezing and cold, a perfect lattice of forms admitting no deviation.

Maxian breathed out, slowly and evenly, and let death enter him with a drawing breath.

Krista, in her desperate attempt to destroy him, had shown him a glimpse of the way. Though she had struggled against the Oath in his company, though she had been an enemy of the mindless power, she had escaped destruction. She had seen a road to survival where he had not. Fleeing from him in his exile at Ottaviano, she had embraced the dark power, giving herself over to Maxian’s defeat. A cancer it sought to drive from the body of the Empire. Maxian had laughed, realizing that his earliest diagnosis had been correct in all but one critical element.

The Oath was not an infection upon the body of the State and the People. He was.

Sand scattered away as Thyatis crashed to the ground. She cried out, pain jolting through her side. The lioness bit down, claws raking the sand for traction. Gasping, Thyatis managed to wedge the haft of the spear into the beast's mouth. Five-inch fangs sheared past, inches from her face, grinding at the wood. She tried to roll, but the lion had her thigh pinned. Frantic, knowing the huntress would rake with a hind leg at any moment, Thyatis stabbed at the beast's eye with her right hand. It turned away, yowling, and she managed to roll free. The lioness spat out the spear, snarling, tail lashing furiously. Thyatis scuttled back and her foot ran into the Nubian girl's prostrate form.

"Weapon!" Thyatis hissed, scrabbling behind her. The girl pushed something hilted into her hand. The lioness shook her head, then padded to the right. The other two lions were circling outside her arc of motion. Sweating now, heart racing in her chest, Thyatis turned as well, digging her feet in, trying to find purchase in the sand. The lioness doubled back, yowling, and Thyatis checked the heft of the blade in her hand. It was large, single-bladed, knife.

Delightful.

The lioness put its head low, tail lashing, eyes burning with rage. Thyatis went still, poised, waiting for the charge or leap. In a corner of her mind, her sense of smell told her the lioness thought she was a rival in heat, come to steal her mate. A flicker of sadness passed through her; black-mane must have been the male of the pride. His life was spilling out on the white sand a hundred feet away.

The lioness leapt, a blur of motion, but Thyatis was ready. She twisted, taking the lion's charge on her moving arm. Her fist caught a ruff of fur at the neck and then she threw her own strength into the movement. The lion catapulted over, yowling in surprise, and slammed onto the sand with a *crunch*. Thyatis staggered, her arm burning with effort. Her teachers in the Open Hand Way would be disgusted, putting her own energy into the throw, but...

The smaller of the other two lions charged in, fangs bared, biting at her neck. Thyatis' right forearm ground into the animals' neck, blocking it away from her head. The knife in her left hand flashed and then blood splattered as it sank into the lionesses' shoulder. Thyatis staggered back, pressed by the beast's weight, striking again and again. The lioness yowled and leapt up, rear legs lashing out. Thyatis screamed, feeling her right thigh split open under the huge yellow talons. Furious rage boiled up in her and she grappled the thing as they rolled on the ground. Steel turned crimson as the blade stabbed, again and again, into the lion's chest. Thyatis suddenly found herself on top of the lioness and ground the knife down with both hands on the hilt.

A huge flat paw slammed into the side of her head, throwing her onto the ground. Blinking blood and sweat from her eyes, Thyatis rolled up, knife clenched in her hand. Blood covered her whole torso and flew from her hair. The young lioness was making a horrible bubbling sound, trying to yowl in fury, but her throat was torn out. Blood spilled onto the sand with each breath. Swaying, the lioness tried to move forward, but fell, the fire in the yellow eyes dimming like a fading lamp.

"Here," the Nubian girl pressed a spear into Thyatis' hand, her face a cold mask. "Finish her. They shouldn't suffer like this."

Thyatis took the spear and ran forward, lightly, her sandals slapping on the sand.

Above her, in the stands, the crowd cheered wildly, sun-hats held aloft. This was the best show they'd seen all year.

Thyatis thrust the spear with all her strength, pinning the dying lioness to the ground. Iron grated on sand. A last spark of life guttered in the lambent eyes and then it was gone. Turning, blood and sweat streaming from her limbs, Diana felt a giddy rush of relief. The other lions slunk away. Attendants in black tunics advanced from iron-gated doorways set into the wall. They would kill or capture the remaining animals.

Sound washed over her as Thyatis raised the spear in salute to the Emperor and the crowd. They were clapping and cheering.

For you, my friends, find these gifts in the cold darkness, let this victory guide you, light your path in the dead world. Oh my friends, find the golden fields heavy with wheat. Drink deep of this life, sweet as wine.

Sweat purred from Maxian's forehead, pooling in the cavity of his throat and shoulders. His shirt was sticky, clinging to his wiry torso. Yet, he lived and breathed and found himself suspended in an ocean of darkness. His balance was a delicate thing, keeping his perception alive, retaining his ability to flex power and alter the world. He struggled to blend into the pattern. The Oath was all around him, in him, pervading all things.

I am not an enemy, he whispered into the darkness. I am a friend. A friend.

He had not been annihilated. Indeed, it seemed that he floated in darkness, carried along with so many other patterns and forms. The prince breathed slower, finding a welcome sense of relief in the balance.

I am still alive.

He opened his eyes. The sun was sliding down into the west. He wiped sweat from his eyes and rose, almost stumbling. It was draining to do nothing in this way. One of the guardsmen approached.

"Bring me wine and something to eat." Maxian was startled by the raspy sound of his voice.

"Of course, lord." The man hurried off.

Maxian sat back down, his arms trembling. "Whooo..." He grinned, then smoothed back his hair. Salt stung his eyes, but he felt elevated, free.

In the Imperial box, under the shade of a large canopy, the Empress Helena looked up from her letter. Though the Emperor had to sit and observe the games, reacting with the crowd, indicating his pleasure or displeasure, the Empress was free to curl up in a large wicker chair. Some soft pillows were wedged behind her back and neck. Her attention had been drawn by a change in the sound of the audience. The bowl shape of the amphitheatre funneled sound into the Imperial box, magnifying it like the mouth of a horn.

Helena craned her white neck, looking out onto the sand. The first battle was done, some foolishness of wild beasts and slaves. One eyebrow, tinted with antimony and carefully shaped by the application of small golden tweezers, rose in surprise. The victors were a pair of women, one dark, one light. It seemed the animals had been defeated. This was unusual. Slaves and criminals rarely lasted long against the beasts. Against the professionals – the *venatores* – half-starved animals rarely triumphed. The two victors approached the Imperial box, herded forward by attendants in black robes and grotesque

gray masks. The redheaded woman reluctantly yielded up a knife, a sword and a bloody spear, throwing them on the ground.

Galen rose, sighing, heavy robes rustling. He stepped to the edge of the Imperial box, taking his time, making sure that everyone in the huge building could see and hear him. As he did so the murmur of the crowd fell away into silence. The matter of the prize monies and the palm branches was of considerable interest to the crowd. Helena sat up as well.

“We have all waited for this day.” The Emperor’s words carried in the silence. The design of the amphitheatre made his voice audible even in the highest seats. “I know that many of you have been impatient for these games, fearing the spirits of the dead would take their displeasure out upon those who still live.”

A low rumble came back in response. Everyone in the city had expressed their opinion, at one time or another, of the Emperor’s delay, usually in unflattering terms. Now that the games had begun, ushered in by a fabulous parade and three days of feasting on the Imperial ticket, the mood of the people had mellowed.

“It is my belief,” Galen continued, raising his voice slightly. “That something should be done well if it is to be done. Excellence in such things takes time. The people of Rome deserve the finest games that can be provided. Are the citizens of this great city not the finest in the world, deserving of the best in all things?”

A cheer rose, echoing from the statues on the highest level, reverberating from the encircling wall and the huge canvas sails now run out to shade the northern side of the amphitheatre. More and more people entered the Flavian as the day progressed and now it was near capacity. Everyone liked to hear how important they were and how much the Emperor cared to put on a spectacular show.

“The portents are good,” Galen declaimed, “and the first fights auspicious! Let these two brave Amazons come forward for their reward!”

The Charon-masked attendants motioned for the red-headed woman and the Nubian girl to approach the Imperial box. They did so, but seemed paralyzed by fear. Helena frowned, seeing that the Gaulish woman was staring down at the sand under her feet, unable to look up.

“You are victorious,” Galen cried, looking out at the crowd rather than down at the two convicts below him. “As Rome is victorious over the world! Your reward is not just life, though that is precious, but the acclaim of these citizens!”

Again there was a tumult of cheering. Most of the people in the crowd weren’t paying attention yet, this was just one of the warm-ups, but those that were had gotten good value for their money. Helena shook her head and rolled her eyes at the thought. Admission was free, though the allotment of seats was carefully controlled and awarded only to the patricians and certain classes of the city. She turned back to her letter, ignoring the two convict women as they were presented with palm leaves and, in a Greek touch, crowns of holly.

Dear Artemisia, she wrote, quill nib squeaking slightly on the parchment. I hope that you are well, or as well as can be, married to that flatulent ox...

Thyatis stared at the crown of holly in her hand. It didn’t seem right to put it on. “Go ahead!” The Nubian girl hissed out of the corner of her mouth. “It’s expected.”

Keeping her head low, Thyatis put on the crown. One of the black robed attendants jabbed at her with a spear and she turned, glaring at the man. It would take only one swift motion to snatch the spear away from him... but she did not. She put on the crown and raised her arms again. Scattered cheers came back. Then she and the Nubian girl were herded away, into one of the tunnels that led out of the arena at ground level.

“What is your name?” The Nubian girl was giggling. Thyatis understood perfectly – they had escaped death. It felt good, being alive. There was a delicious lassitude in her limbs, a fine afterglow. Far better than the gray pain that had held her captive for so long.

“Diana,” she answered, clasping forearms with the slave. “And yours?”

“Candace.” The girl grinned, showing fine white teeth. “I guess we *are* Amazons!”