

Blood Ties

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Chapter 1

The Assertion War had only lasted a mere five years, yet it would remain in the memories of generation after generation. It wasn't a great display of military strategy, nor was it a crusade against evil. It left no far reaching affects, just the devastation of it's immediate Empire.

The Assertion War would be remembered for it's sheer suddenness, swiftness of achievement, and manic barbarity.

The War was omitted from history books and never taught to subsequent generations and it was very rarely spoken of, but it was always there.

Azoria was the Empire. It was the seat of government, administrative capital, business and finance nerve centre and home to the Azorian Military. It was the city of Art as well as Science and people travelled from miles away and for many months to study within it's schools and universities. This was Azoria, and had been for centuries, ruled as a republic under it's direct, hereditary Defenders. The noble family of DeGaise had flourished and produced sons to continue the royal bloodline for as long as anyone could remember.

Azoria itself was a city unparalleled anywhere in any realm for it's beauty. It was a vast, sprawling metropolis that was almost completely square. The reason for it's unique, and contained geometric shape was it's location. The huge capital city was situated in the massive Sapphire Lake; a lake so vast that some of it was uncharted and the only reason it couldn't be literally classed as a sea, or even an ocean, was because it was landlocked. The city was in riding distance, over precisely constructed bridges, to the continent of Plaus. Three of these bridges spidered out from three of Azoria's geometric edges to connect to strategically advantageous points on Plaus. Each bridge came from one of Azoria's Quarters, the Third Quarter being un-bridged, or 'blind'.

The Defenders DeGaise had lived, and succeeded under a family of advisers as old, if not older, than themselves. If the DeGaise family was the inspirational, figurehead, heroic rulers of Azoria, then the family Athula were it's commercial and economic backbone.

Some say that the preservation of the DeGaise bloodline became a paranoid necessity that led to genetic unsoundness, some say that Loram DeGaise was, in fact, the illegitimate son of his father, Hap, and a diseased brothel wench, some say he was influenced by power hungry priests, some say it was Loram who influenced the priests. Whatever the reason, a maniacal, insane streak was born to the family DeGaise and it lay dormant in Loram DeGaise for almost fifty years, until the death of his father, Hap.

Defender Loram had ambitious ideas for Azoria, many of them fantastic, many of them impossibilities and almost all of them unaffordable. Libraries and schools were torn down to build tributes to the DeGaise family, namely Loram. Laws were passed ordering all teachings to portray Loram, and his ancestors, as immortal gods imbued with magical and mystical powers and the military divisions of Azoria were quadrupled in anticipation of any factions who dare disagree with the Defender.

It is said that an incomplete tapestry, woven in gold, and silver and encrusted with priceless jewels sent Loram into a frenzy. The work of art had been specifically ordered by him and was to depict him sitting on a golden throne surrounded by god favoured creatures and wearing a jewelled crown

of the deities. He ordered that the money to fund his unfinished tribute be found within days and when it couldn't be, he had all six craftsmen beheaded in public by the sword.

This incident was a step too far for Guill Athula who requested his release from the employment of the insane Defender. Loram refused and became further enraged. No one was quite certain what actually turned Loram's interests to the finances of this very successful family but Loram impounded all the Athulan available money by force, outcasting Guill, and his family to live in poverty on the outskirts of the city. Loram was convinced the family Athula had been accumulating wealth at Loram's expense for years and although Guill was exiled to poverty, Loram mounted a persecution assault that wiped out Guill, his wife, three sons and four grandsons.

More and more people were obviously becoming frightened and sickened at their ruler's tyranny which perpetuated Loram's insanity and paranoia. He set out to eradicate the family Athula, all their known business associates and contacts and anyone at all who sympathised with them in any way, shape or form. The Azorian quadrupled army was put to use very effectively in The Assertion War.

Such was the insanity and barbarity that the victorious party in the War, the DeGaise government and Loram DeGaise became soon unpopular by the very Military that had supported them. Most soldiers simply left the service and left Azoria. With no army to stop them or to do his bidding, Loram was much weakened. The Azorian Military officially disbanded itself only two years after the end of the Assertion War, and Loram lost his grip on reality all together. The government swiftly reinstated itself to prevent total anarchy that was bound to follow such drastic events and the people of Azoria demanded the life of Loram DeGaise. The Azorian government refused. They stood steadfast in the belief that to execute their insane Defender, or worse still, hand him over to the people for them to do it, would put them on an equal despicable par to the man himself. Governor Spence Toller appointed a very charismatic man by the name of Herod Bonetti to persuade the population that Loram's suffering would be more effective if he lived within the confines of his own, now very heavily guarded Palace, and his own insane mind.

The Military was gradually rebuilt with soldiers dedicated to the government, and who swore never to let tyranny rule again.

This would be remembered by the Azorians because this dramatic and bloody chapter in their history lasted eight years only in total. Some say the period is ongoing, as Azoria will take an epoch to overcome the scars left in the aftermath of the Assertion Wars. Families fled their homes and were scattered all over the Empire, including the surrounding Plaus wasteland that consisted of acres of woodland alternating with great plains of barren and hostile land with only a few recognised travel routes. Azoria itself recovered remarkably well due to its 'sweeping under the carpet' tactics. No records survived of the War and it was never taught in schools, or discussed in public. The old military of Loram's day had disbanded and exiled themselves but the new military was still on the lookout for any remnants of that time, any reminders of that time.

Reminders came in many shapes and forms, including surviving Athulan supporters. What of them? Would they be allowed to simply return and voice their discontent? Perhaps demand compensation for their injustice? Would they look upon an Azorian government simply as a DeGaise puppet body? Would they demand re-elections? Maybe even the death of Loram DeGaise, as their urban counterparts had? It didn't take long to regard the former supporters of the Athula family as prospective rabble-rousers. They could seriously compromise the whole, still growing, framework of Azoria while it was still in its infancy and the anarchy they'd tried so desperately to avoid would be upon them.

The law that stated that it was illegal to support the family Athula wasn't amended straight away for

fear of 'unrest'. Such dissidents, however, were not to be harmed, when found. There were any amount of menial but necessary jobs to be done in rebuilding the city that the Athulans should gratefully take while they thought about how lucky they were to have survived. For the less compliant there were still the jail-houses and the arenas, in a reformatory capacity of course. The words 'slavery' and 'imprisonment' were all but taken out of the Azorian vocabulary.

Chapter 2

Administrator Herod Bonetti paused on his way along the road to the parliament building and backtracked a few steps in order to look down a side road. This side road connected to another road running at right-angles to it, and parallel to Parliament road. Bonetti was rather surprised to see General Faust Cooper, on horseback, together with seven or eight of his division, also on horseback. These men should have left over half an hour ago.

Herod made his way along the side road and Faust saw him and groaned. Administrator Bonetti had always annoyed the fifty year old general. He was a pompous twit and was always busy-bodying in every area of Azoria's running whether it was his area of expertise or not. Matters Military were certainly not the Administrator's affair, even if they were just the routine scout divisions.

“Still here General Cooper?” Bonetti rose his eyebrows at the mounted General. Faust was twice this runt's size anyway and resisted the urge to dismount and loom a bit over the government official. He also resisted the urge to tell Bonetti that of course he wasn't still here, and merely a figment of the Administrator's imagination. Bonetti probably had no imagination anyway.

“Slight delay Administrator Bonetti. We won't be long. Are we obstructing you?” Faust asked sarcastically.

“No but you are obstructing the entrance to a public building.” Bonetti said awkwardly. The division was gathered in front of one of the larger brothels in Azoria. “Do I want to know why?”

“Obviously, otherwise you wouldn't have asked.” Faust tried not to snap. “Like I said, we won't be long. Quarter One Bridge is just over there isn't it? Where else would you have us wait? The other divisions have already left.”

“I wouldn't have you wait anywhere.” Bonetti twitched his nostrils at Faust. “You were supposed to have left thirty eight minutes ago. Please don't tell me your men assemble in the whorehouse.” He said smugly.

“Of course not!” Faust said hotly. “My men are of the most respectable character and reputa....shit.” Faust covered his face with his huge hand when he saw the dark haired, dark skinned youth they'd all been waiting for, dart out of the brothel door and grab the reigns of his horse from another soldier. “Nice timing, you shit.” He muttered.

“I presume you're waiting to reprimand cadet Astrella?” Bonetti said aloofly.

“You bet I am.” Faust muttered. “We'll be setting off now Admin...”

“He's to be favoured with no preferential treatment because of his parentage Faust, remember that.” Bonetti sniffed and Faust almost erupted.

“And you remember who's division this is.” He growled. “If I wasn't a fair and impartial man, I would never have reached the rank of General. Cadet Astrella is treated in exactly the same way as my other cadets; fairly and without prejudice. Good day Administrator Bonetti.” Faust swung his

horse round and headed towards Quarter One Bridge. That pompous ass had sent his already bad mood plummeting towards the depths of the Sapphire Lake. Scout trips indeed! What in hell for? He'd argued against this unnecessary routine many times in parliament and got nowhere. The government was as paranoid as it was in Loram DeGaise's day, a long and weary nine years ago. That wretched disgrace of a War had officially ended four years ago and the government still insisted on regular scout patrols weeding through the same areas of Plaus over and over again in case they'd 'missed any'.

“Sir?” Cadet Louis Marx was almost as irritating as Bonetti but without the social status.

“No.” Faust answered flatly to whatever Louis was going to ask.

“Sir this isn't the first time we've been delayed by Ben Astrella's social hobbies!” The twenty year old cadet pressed. “If he must frequent those places then why can't he ensure he returns to barracks the same night? Anyone else would be expected to. Sir just because he's the son of Lord and Lady Astrella”

“Oh pause for bloody breath Marx, for shit's sake!” Faust roared, attracting the attention of the entire division. “Who put you in charge? Bugger off.” He shouted at Marx then glared horribly at him when he opened his mouth to argue. “Astrella! Get your scraggy little arse up here. You're riding with me to make sure you keep your pecker in your pants! Now!” There was a wave of guffaws and smirks as Ben Astrella made his way to the front of the division.

“Morning Sir.” He said brightly.

“Piss off.” Faust said shortly.

Ben was a pain in the proverbial and no mistake. He was hugely popular with everyone, not just the ladies of the night. He was also very intelligent and a brilliant soldier, as well as a talented artist and a shrewd businessman. He owed most of this to his educated upbringing in a noble household. His father was a landowning Lord in one of the cities on Plaus, quite an important Lord who had influential ties with Azoria. His mother was a titled lady in her own right, she'd been Marquess Lily DeGaise before her marriage to Lord Herz Astrella, a title she was grateful to adopt from him after her insane distant cousin's atrocities. His attractiveness to the fairer sex was also due to his father. Ben Astrella was the double of the handsome and respected Lord with a 6'4 stature and a dark, swarthy complexion. All this popularity from everywhere was often misinterpreted as favouritism. The basic truth was that he was just an all round likeable young man. Faust had often wondered why this handsome, muscular, twenty year old used brothels at all, albeit the higher class ones. He must have had girls, decent girls, falling at his feet! Why would he pay for it?

“Do you think anyone's still out here Sir?” Ben nodded towards the fringe of trees that was now in sight from their position of three quarters the way over the bridge.

“Do I hell.” Faust said moodily. “Who in their right mind would lurk about here in the same place for four bloody years? No one. Anyone there ever was out here is either in one of the cities on Plaus, sweeping streets in Azoria or dead.”

“The last option hopefully.” Another cadet had pulled up alongside them. “Do we take the same sectors as we did....”

“Hang on. What did you say?” Faust glowered at this blatant display of narrow-minded bigotry. “Pape isn't it?”

“Marcus Pape, yes Sir. Let's face it Sir, I doubt any of us joined the Military to babysit a load of

anarchist shits who'd slit your throat as soon as look at you." Pape said seriously.

"So why did you join the Military? To do the throat slitting first? If I ever hear any of that type of bilge again I'll make sure you're posted to the out-plains of Haggardan. Do you understand? I will not tolerate that sort of prejudice in my Military, that goes for the lot of you. Same sectors as last time. Move out!" Faust got off his horse and tethered it. He fully intended sitting under a tree and sleeping off his bad mood until his division returned to the bridge.

Ben didn't share the same attitude to the scout trips as his General, in fact, he quite enjoyed them. It was just like taking a stroll in the countryside while off-duty only he was getting paid for it.

"Ben you want to watch yourself." Cadet Rand Lorette caught up with Ben. Rand and Ben had began their training on the same day, the only two on that particular day. They'd been close friends ever since. "That horse's arse Bonetti has it in for you."

"Wrong." Ben laughed. "I know who his favoured ladies are in the house of flowers back there. It's me who has it in for him, at least twice a night." He grinned widely and Rand burst out laughing. "Actually that's true Rand. He never actually ... gets it done. You know? I've no idea why. Julia told me he just sits there leering and looks at her, then goes on his odd little way. I wonder what that's about?"

"Well he's the wrong shape for a Eunuch." Rand bellowed another laugh. "Maybe not entirely in favour of the ladies? You never know with the government lot. Hell I'm sweating trough-loads here. Why we have to keep trawling over the same old ground I don't know." He tugged at his blue, officially issued tunic.

"Better than urban patrol." Ben reminded him. "Ah it's lovely out here Rand!" He looked around at the greenery of the woods and watched the tiny flecks of sunlight that sprang across the mossy ground as they filtered through the foliage. Fluffy, airborne spores spiralled in the clean air like sprites and birds sang loudly from the branches of the unspoiled forest. "It's a lot like this at home in Tibrae. I used to think it was the most boring place in existence and I couldn't wait to get out of it. I just about begged the old boy to send me to the Azorian Military."

"You miss the place, I know. I was born in Azoria so I know no different. How long is it since you went home?" Rand asked.

"Nine months. I've only been the once since I came here two years ago. My parents have been to Azoria a few times though." Ben told his friend.

"Ben you'd have to be blind, retarded and under a stone not to know when your parents are here. The full bloody military is on security duties." Rand laughed. "Mind you, they do that for my dad too, every time he gets out of jail."

Their laughter was interrupted by an ear-splitting howl, yells and shouts, and hundreds of birds taking flight from their branches.

"What the hell ...?" Another howl set the cadets of running towards a group of dense bushes.

The scene that Ben and Rand found would have been funny had it not been so astonishing. Marcus Pape had a little boy of around ten years old in a secure headlock and the child was kicking lumps out of the soldier's shins. The howls, however, hadn't come from Pape, but from Louis Marx. He was standing clutching his groin and also had blood pouring from his hand. Crouched down about ten feet in front of him was a little girl who looked remarkably like the male child. She was snarling

horribly and had blood on her nose and chin.

“You useless donkey Marx!” Pape shouted. “You, you little bitch! Get over here now!”

“Up yours you shit-bag!” The little girl screamed. “Get off my brother!”

“Get over here now or so help me I'll use you as a midden and bury you alive! Both of you!” Pape drew his sword and wedged it under the boy's chin.

“Pape!” Ben yelled and ran out from the bushes. “Don't you dare, you bloody psychopath. Put down that damned sword!”

“Back off Astrella, you aren't in Tibrae now. I found them.” Pape shouted back.

“Are you mad? They're kids! Let him go you addle headed cretin.” Ben bellowed.

“Yes let him go you big Eunuch's dick!” The little girl yelled, edging towards Ben.

“Kore!” Her brother managed to gurgle. “Stop talking like that! Eunuch's don't have them anyway.”

“Well duh! That's what I meant. YAAAA!” the girl leaped forward and caught poor Rand square in the groin with her blond haired head. “I've got him Leo! I've got him!” She dashed behind the doubled up cadet and began striking his back with a hand sized rock. “Let my brother go or I'll kill him!” She howled.

“For shit's sake!” Ben could scarcely believe his eyes. “Pape let go of that kid, you look preposterous.” He rolled his eyes. Pape set his jaw and didn't move. “Pape, I said let him go.” Ben drew his sword and stood in front of this fanatic.

“So we can do what? Take them back to Azoria? Don't you think there enough of these gutter-rats begging on our streets?” Pape roared. “They aren't even old enough for the whoring trade for another couple of years! Let him go? Stick it Astrella!” General Cooper appeared behind Pape and hit him smartly over the head with the hilt of his sword. The cadet crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

“Er Sir? Do you want to help me too?” Rand was trying to fend off blows from the stone with his forearms and had already sustained quite a few scratches and bruises.

“You big tart Lorette. Sort that out please Astrella.” Faust set about reviving Pape with his boot and a few shakes by his hair. “Move one inch and I'll impale you to the closest tree Marx.” Marx stopped in his tracks and turned round.

“Hey!” Ben laughed and stood in front of the irate little girl, catching at least six hits with the rock. “He's with me, he won't hurt you or Leo. I promise.” He crouched down and watched Kore panting for breath, her knuckles white from clutching her rock. “Get up Rand, you soft wench.”

“That hurt!” Rand protested. “Head-butt to the jewels! No fair.” He wailed. “I bet Leo won't do that.” Rand smiled at the little girl and went to check on her brother.

“See? He's OK is Rand. Kore's a pretty name.” Ben watched as Kore settled down from her frenzy. Her eyes stopped flashing and her breathing evened out. “Leo's fine too. Look.” Ben moved out of the way so Kore could see Leo having a small cut on his cheek looked at by Rand.

“Who's that old man?” Kore eyed the whole scene suspiciously.

“Old oh! That's General Cooper, he's my boss.” Ben tried not to laugh. “Those soldiers are in a lot of trouble Kore. Our boss there did not tell them to do that to you. You do believe me don't you? None of the other soldiers would ever do that. Those two will be in a lot of trouble when we get back to Azoria.”

“I believe you.” Kore said slowly. “You helped us and I beat that one up.”

“You certainly did. Did you beat that creep over there up too?” Ben nodded at Marx.

“He pulled my hair and said he was going to sell me to a Broth Hall. Why would he need to sell me? I'd have gone on my own.” Kore said seriously.

“Er ... I don't think you quite understand what he meant.” Ben said awkwardly.

“Well it's a long time since me and Leo had broth. I tried to make some once but it was like toad's piss.” Kore sighed.

“Kore! Stop swearing!” Leo came dashing over to protect his sister. “You're not to swear like that, if mum heard you she'd paddle your backside.”

“Your mother?” Ben glanced at Faust who had tied Pape's arms to Marx's arms and pushed them to the ground. “Is she here? I mean close by?” Ben severely doubted it given the racket they'd just made. No parent would leave their children to such a situation. Kore looked at Leo and he went and put his arm round her.

“She's not here any more. She went to be a star in the sky.” Leo said bravely.

“Oh I'm sorry to hear that.” Ben really meant it too. “How long have you been out here?”

“All the time.” Leo answered. “I'm not sure where we lived when we were babies. My daddy was a brave soldier like you.”

“Really?” Ben looked at Faust who shook his head, meaning 'not for the Azorian Military he wasn't'. Of course he wasn't, otherwise his family wouldn't be out here in exile.

“We can't remember what he looks like for real but Kore has a picture in her bag.” Kore showed Ben a battered portrait of a man in some sort of cloth armour. The picture was so badly worn and creased that the type of armour couldn't be seen, nor could a good likeness of the man's face.

“He's a very strong looking man.” Ben said encouragingly. “He went to the War then?”

“I think so.” Leo nodded. “Mum said everyone was just attacking everyone else and no one knew why. That's why my daddy brought us out here. He never came back for us.” Leo's lip wobbled. “We aren't babies, me and Kore know he must have died but we didn't say so in case it made our mum cry.” Ben was close to crying too, let alone anyone else.

“What happened to your mum?” Ben asked gently.

“She got sick just before our birthday last year. She just got worse and worse even though me and Kore tried to make her better. She wasn't breathing at all one day when we woke up. We sat next to

her to keep her warm for two more days in case she was going to start breathing again.”

“Oh for mercy's sake.” Ben looked at Faust and Rand, sheer pity etched all over his face.

“We had to make a big hole to put her in because the birds kept landing on her.” Kore helped. “It took us two weeks to make the hole big enough but we covered mum with clothes and leaves and kept the fire going.”

“Where did you bury her Kore?” Ben asked what the Military would have asked them anyway.

“Just at the bottom of that big mountain in the next forest.” Kore answered.

“The Haskell Mountain?” Ben asked in surprise and Leo nodded. “You crossed two jungles and a thirty mile plane by yourselves?”

“It took from our birthday last year to now and we had our birthday six weeks ago.” Kore nodded. “We're really good at looking after ourselves aren't we Leo? Our mum was too and she taught us how to do it properly. We were supposed to go to Tibrae though Leo.”

“Mum said if ever we got lost to go to Tibrae.” Leo Explained. “She said to keep away from Azoria. We've gone the wrong way.” Leo held his sister's hand. “I know you're Azorian soldiers because you said so earlier. Will your boss over there let us go to Tibrae?”

“Listen to me.” Ben stood up. “There's no one fighting any more in Azoria, that all stopped four years ago.” The children didn't look too sure. “Honestly. If there was still fighting you'd be able to hear it. Also I wouldn't be out here with only two friends if the War was still happening. I'd be either in Azoria, or with at least a million other soldiers. Yes? Ask General Cooper, he's my boss and Generals aren't allowed to tell lies.” The children looked at Faust who looked terrified of them.

“He's right. The War's finished. It was silly anyway.” Faust coughed. “Take no notice of those two shit bags over there.” Faust threw a few stones at Marx and Pape. “They aren't real soldiers. I'm going to throw them out of my nice army.”

“Oo!” Kore seemed hugely impressed at Faust's power. “Serves them right General Cougar. I think you're a very good General. Will you let us go to the Broth Hall?” Faust made a funny squeaking noise. “What? I'm hungry!”

“Yes, quite. Astrella stop smirking, you're on child watch. Lorette help me throw these dung heaps on a horse please.”

“I'll help!” Kore ran at her enemies with a stick and Faust flinched and glared at Ben.

“Leo go get your sister. Only soldiers are allowed to throw dung heaps around.” Ben said and Leo ran off to grab Kore. “What will we do with them Sir? Hell I never, ever expected to find anyone out here, not ever.” Ben exhaled loudly.

“Me either, especially not two kids. Twins eh?” Faust nodded to where Rand had let the children prod Marx and Pape towards a horse with sticks, very gently.

“Apparently so. Sir with all respect and just between me and you, I'm not comfortable with turning them over to the government authorities. I know, I shouldn't be saying that.” Ben looked at the ground.

“You'd be abnormal if you were comfortable with it.” Faust said gruffly. “Adults would have been different, there is employment for them, albeit of an atrocious nature. The state run orphanages are rife with arseholes and exploiters, I know as well as you do. They'd be shipped off to Killiad within six months.” He shuddered. Killiad was another continent on the far off shores of Lake Sapphire. It was noted for it's lack of civil laws and lack of any sort of morales. “Don't suppose you're ready to actually keep hold of one of your conquests and have a ready made family?”

“I'm pleased you're smirking Sir.” Ben said dryly. “Even if I was, it wouldn't be an option, not with my family being a tad high profile. The children would be investigated straight away. Even I can't produce two ten year old Astrella heirs overnight. You?”

“Not even in jest Astrella. I'm fifty and a confirmed bachelor and brothel-rat. They need to disappear into society without drawing attention to the fact that they came from out here.” Faust frowned at his renegade soldiers. “They're bound to make waves. I'll fill out the forms for the state transfers to an orphanage and get Marx to deliver them to the government.”

“Sir! Sir you've just said how awful ...”

“Oh hush your noise.” Faust waved his hand at Ben. “If I bring charges against those two bastards then it'll all be dragged out in front of a string of tribunal courts and the focus of it will be their behaviour towards those kids. Those kids who we are trying not to draw attention to. You with me so far?” Ben nodded and Faust went quiet.

“And?” Ben pressed.

“Dunno.” Faust scowled. “I need to think. Go and get them and keep them occupied and out of the way until we get them back to Azoria. I'll go ahead with Lorette and the rest of the division, then double back after I've dispatched the forms with Marx. I'll meet you at the edge of the bridge.”

“I'm a soldier not a bloody nanny.” Ben grumbled. “Sir it makes my guts churn to think those two psychopaths aren't going to get reprimanded for this crap. Athula sympathiser descendants or not, they're still ten year old kids.”

“You like kids don't you? You'll have a houseful of your own by the time you're my age.” Faust smiled and headed off to meet the rest of the division.

“What's going to happen to the kids?” Rand whispered to Ben on his way past with his dung laden horse.

“They'll be OK Rand.” Ben smiled weakly.

“I doubt it.” Rand said sadly. “Poor little sods might have been better off out here.” He lead the horse past Ben and through the trees after General Cooper.

Chapter 3

Ben sat against a tree with the twins and watched the First Quarter Bridge. Darkness had fallen about an hour ago and there was still no sign of General Faust Cooper.

“I'm cold.” Kore whimpered, huddling up to her brother.

“It's OK Kore. Captain Soldier will look after us, and General Whooper.” Leo hugged Kore.

“Oh I'm not a Captain.” Ben smiled. “Not yet anyway. I'm only a Cadet, like a trainee soldier.”

“So you aren't a real soldier?” Kore asked.

“Oh I'm a real soldier.” Ben assured her. “It takes a long time to be a good soldier like General Cooper. Any fool can run at someone wanting a fight but if you want to be a soldier you have to learn to do more than that. Look at me, I don't fight just now, I've no need to. I practice so I'll be able to look after people who aren't soldiers and that includes fighting, medicine, thinking, and believing.”

“Believing what?” Kore asked.

“Believing yourself.” Ben answered. “And believing that what you're doing and training for is right. Soldiers don't hurt people just to say they can, in fact every soldier I know would rather help someone than hurt them. That's why we become soldiers, to help people and to look after what we love; our families and our homes.”

“But what about the bad soldiers who killed my daddy? Didn't they want him to look after his family and his home?” Kore said.

“Kore hush. Captain Soldier is helping us, he's nice.” Leo told his sister. Ben recognised a very intelligent child in Leo. He knew that Ben was an Azorian soldier, he knew that his mother had warned them away from Azoria, therefore it must have been the Azorian army that posed a danger to his family. Despite that he believed the evidence of his own eyes, ears and sense and realised the War was over. He couldn't hear it, and small groups of soldiers didn't wander about in the woods in wartime, as Ben had pointed out. He knew that both him and his sister had no option but to trust Ben, as an adult and the only person who'd treated them with kindness since their mother had died. In his own, ten year old way, he was trying to keep the peace by not letting his curious sister offend the Azorian Soldier who'd promised to help them.

“Well they were bad soldiers Kore, you're right.” Ben nodded and smiled at Leo. “They were bad because they were told to be bad by a very, very wicked man who threatened their families if they didn't do the bad things he wanted. They felt very sorry after they'd done all those horrible things, so bad that they didn't want to be soldiers any more. They all moved away so this wicked lunatic wouldn't try and force them to do anything like that again. That left Azoria with no one to look after it except this wicked leader. That's when they started a new army, a nice army that wasn't scared of the leader and that wasn't scared to have him put in jail where he belongs. We learned from the mistakes the old army made so we won't let it happen again. The Azorian army today know the War

was horrible and they all know it was wrong and should never have happened. They'll do anything to avoid it again.”

“See? I told you we were going to be OK Kore.” Leo told his sister and Ben felt like crying. How could he guarantee that? He honestly felt like fleeing at that very minute with these innocent kids and contacting his parents in Tibrae to get them there. “Look Sir, lights.” Leo pointed to the bridge and Ben got to his feet. It was Faust.

“Frigging paperwork.” The General cursed.

“Were Marx and Pape ... OK?” Ben asked in disgust. They didn't deserve to be OK in any manner, in Ben's opinion.

“Both on urban duties indefinitely thinking themselves very lucky not to be patrolling the out-plains. Umm nice hair-do Astrella.” Faust nodded at the leaves and flowers and twigs that Kore had decorated his head with. “Come on, it's getting cold out here.”

Ben secured the twins onto his horse and instructed Leo to keep tight hold of Kore seeing as the poor child was almost asleep due to sheer exhaustion.

“Sir where are we taking them?” Ben asked of Faust as they neared Azoria. “Sir?” He repeated when he got no immediate answer from the General.

“Ben there's only one place in Azoria that no one takes any notice of, that no one checks up on and who's population isn't accounted for as strictly as the rest of the city.” Faust turned round to see if his most trusted cadet was understanding him.

“By the stars Sir, surely you don't mean the Pit?”

“I do.”

“Sir we can't take them there! I agree they aren't policed at all and they're a law unto themselves but that's a reason not to take them in itself! Sir there are no children in the Pit!” Ben objected. The Pit was an area in the Third Quarter solely turned over to the gladiators, and their instructors, and the overseers of the arena. It was a ramshackle maze of squalid huts and stone sheds and was surrounded by a thirty foot, barbed topped wall and secured at it's only entrance by a twelve foot wide, solid iron, double gate that was locked by the overseers when the services of the Pit's occupants weren't required. “Sir they're kids! How the hell can they function in the Pit? It's sole purpose is to train gladiators and produce gladiators.”

“Enough!” Faust said in irritation. “I know all that lad, I know.” The old General said wearily. “Even if they have to beg on the streets of the Pit, at least they'll stay in Azoria and un-abused. In any other part of the city, they'd be picked off as vagrants and sold before they reached an orphanage. Ben can you honestly say that the not knowing wouldn't drive you insane? You know what they'd be sold into and for what purpose, and you'd pray every night that they'd perished before they'd reached their destination, but you'd never know for certain. Even in the slums of the Pit that sort of practice would meet with hostility and would you like to meet hostility from a whole sector of gladiators? I bloody wouldn't. I know it sounds warped but the safest place for those kids is the only place where there are no other kids and where the lifestyle is harsh and brutal because it has to be for the adults and their occupations. Adults Ben. No kids. We have no idea what their reaction to those children is going to be but we do know what the rest of Azoria's reaction will be. The people in the Pit are, or were, ordinary people Ben, people who were forced there through slavery. They aren't criminals in the strict definition of the word. Gladiator doesn't mean barbarian

and it doesn't mean bad person.” Faust got off his horse and tethered it outside the Third Quarter barracks, a mere ten minute walk from the Pit.

“The government have forgotten to power the lights there again.” Ben said miserably, looking at the outline of the slum that was the Pit.

“Hardly surprising. Parliament are in session, they need the power supplies for the Parliament building. Hand me the one that's asleep.” Faust took Kore from the horse and lowered her to the ground while Ben helped Leo dismount. “Blacklock's meeting us at the side gate.” This gate was the one used by the overseers. Blacklock was one of the most prestigious gladiator trainers in Azoria. He was himself, an Athulan sympathiser who had earned his freedom within a remarkably short space of eight months. Perhaps 'earning his freedom' wasn't quite accurate seeing as the only job as a free man was instructing gladiators, rather than actually being one. He was still living in the Pit and probably always would.

“Leo where are we going?” Kore whispered, clutching her brother's hand.

“It's OK Kore don't be scared. I think General Cooter is taking us to a school.” Leo whispered back. “We'll be OK Captain Soldier, we're used to being OK.” He turned to look at Ben.

“I know you are Leo, there's none better. Take care of your sister and always, always, be there for each other. Never let anyone split you up, that's very important.” Ben wanted to run all the way to Tibrae and not come back at all. What was their survival chance in this place? Ben simply couldn't bring himself to think about it.

“Well no guarantees but I can assure you the government won't find them.” Blacklock was talking to Faust. “They're on my own property Faust, I can't do any fairer than that.”

“No, no you can't. I know you can't offer certainties either Blacklock but at least you've given them a chance to reach their teens. I owe you and never be afraid to claim on it at any time.” Faust turned and nodded at Ben and the twins.

“Are we going to the Broth Hall?” Kore asked Ben.

“The where?” Blacklock roared a laugh. “Not in here young missy, we're all prim and proper.” Blacklock took both soldiers completely by surprise by hoisting Kore off her feet and smiling at Leo. “Something wrong?” He asked the gaping men who shook their heads. “Good. Say goodnight to the officers kids.” Blacklock soon disappeared into the shadows of the Pit leaving Ben and Faust outside the gate.

“Blacklock had kids?” Ben asked in shock.

“I'd say so judging by the way he handled that. Shit I didn't know. I hope I wasn't tactless in any way.” Faust chewed his lip.

“I think if you had been, you'd have a dent somewhere. You tend to know about it if you've offended a gladiator. They'll be all right Sir, they have to be.” Ben said, more for his own benefit than the General's. “It's a strong possibility that those damned arenas will be abolished soon anyway, they should be the first on the reform list, in my opinion.”

“Mine too but I'm privy to income lists and the revenue they produce is extraordinary. Greedy whores.” Faust cursed the government. “Come on, the ale house awaits us and we aren't on duty

tomorrow, I've just decided.”

Chapter 4

Leo was busy in the library where he worked, correcting a stack of papers of all their abominable spelling mistakes. He taught languages, to anyone who wanted to learn them, from a small room adjoining the library and was convinced that this particular lot were trying to develop a language of their own.

“I’ll be with you in a minute.” He called out when he heard someone entering the building.

“You’ll have to be, I can’t bloody read.” Leo recognised the voice of Shawn straight away. Shawn was a gladiator and a very good one.

“Shawn! Normally I’d be pleased to see you but this isn’t one of your usual haunts.” Leo said apprehensively. “Kore?”

“Is fine ... sort of. Oh settle down Leo. You asked me to report every scratch and I do!” Shawn sat himself down on a chair opposite Leo. “She got herself a dislocated thumb and a teensy cut on her ribs. That’s all.”

“Got Herself?” Leo threw down his pencil. “And I doubt the gladiator definition of ‘teensy’ is the same as anyone else’s. She wasn’t supposed to be in the arena today.” He fumed.

“Well Freda Pix was running a temperature Leo there was no way she could have gone out there. She’d have been hurt, maybe killed.” Shawn explained.

“So that means Kore has to substitute every bloody time does it?” Leo snapped. “I’m sorry Shawn, it’s not your fault. My sister is a masochistic psychopath, I know.”

“Nah, just bloody good.” Shawn laughed. “Relax Leo, there aren’t many who can beat Kore, you know that.”

Leo knew it all right. They’d both trained for the arena but it was Kore who’d excelled at it, Leo was never going to be good enough. He was a scholar, a natural boffin and bookworm. Leo simply didn’t have his sister’s temperament nor her affinity for adrenalin. Obviously there was no such thing as a poor gladiator, they were either good enough or dead and Leo wasn’t destined to last long at all. Kore substituted herself in many, many of his match-ups, as well as doing her own and it had led to a few nasty mistakes that could have been tragic. Kore was Blacklock’s star pupil and it was clear from the start that she was going to follow in his footsteps to freedom. When she did so, at a rapid rate, she forfeited it. Leo got the pardon pass and Kore’s money she made in the arena pushed him on a path straight from the Pit to an academic job in the library. Leo had since passed up several positions outside of Azoria because they would have taken him away from his sister.

The iron gates of the Pit hadn’t been locked for over four years now and the days of winning freedom were over. The gladiators still existed. They basically found themselves free to leave the Pit that most of them had called home for years, but had nowhere to go. The majority of them had no academic qualifications and no other skills, which rendered them virtually unemployable. The

menial jobs that the government would have them take were scoffed at quite openly by the gladiators. They were a very proud people, some had reached celebrity status in the arena, like Kore had. Kore washing dishes or scrubbing middens? Leo shuddered at what her reaction would be if she was ever asked to do that. The only difference between now and four years ago was the physical condition of the Pit's gate. It was wide open and its iron hinges had started to rust. The Pit was still the home of the gladiators and it was still a slum.

“Are they ever going to pave this muck-midden?” Leo grumbled as mud from the streets of the Pit rose up to his ankles. At least Kore had laid a few stone slabs round her abode, which consisted of a single story that seemed to expand every time Leo saw it. “Was that bit there last week?” He pointed to a square appendix building that had been tacked on to the side of his sister's home.

“She wanted a storage room. Apparently her firewood was getting damp and she also suspected Ray Jenkus of helping himself to it.” Shawn smirked.

“I saw him yesterday, he has two black eyes and a broken nose. I presume he hasn't been in the arena?” Leo winced at his twin's thuggery.

“Nope.” Shawn laughed. “She knocked most of that up herself, windows and all.” Leo wouldn't doubt it. Kore had 'knocked up' just about the whole house that she used to share with Leo. It was on Blacklock's patch but he'd given up insisting on 'planning permission' years ago. Kore needed only her own permission born of her own necessity. It was hardly surprising she was such an excellent athlete. All she ever did was manual exertion. No amount of physical exercise could add inches to height, however, and Kore was stuck at a lofty five feet two which set her as the tiniest gladiator in the village. Leo seemed to sprout suddenly once he's left the Pit and now towered over just about everyone at over six feet. Nothing could alter the twins' looks though, they were still identical, despite their genders. They still both had silvery blond hair and huge blue eyes. Blacklock called them pixies, a name that still suited the scaled down Kore.

Leo and Shawn found Kore's house in emptiness. Leo stood and fumed and Shawn looked at the ceiling.

“Do you want to match guesses?” Leo said shortly and stormed out of the house.

One thing that certainly hadn't changed about the Pit was Dresk's Ale House, and its lack of any sort of licensing laws. It was open, and active, every hour of every day and was the social centre of the village. Leo preferred to call it 'unsocial', as it was as rough an establishment as you'd find anywhere.

“Leo! Just in time.” A woman who was as tall as Leo was grabbed him by the arm as he entered the ale house. “I've no sparring partner and I'm getting flabby. Want to help me work out?” She winked at Leo and a table full of customers started to laugh.

“Oh not just now Bride.” Leo laughed too. “Flabby? Pfft. Where's Kore?”

“In the back with Blacklock. He's stitching her up.” Bride answered. “She's amazing Leo, you should be very proud of her.”

“Stitching her up?” Leo said in alarm. “Shawn! You said a teensy cut!”

“You really are a washerwoman.” Shawn rolled his eyes. “Leo she's fine. I'll bet next week's earnings that there's no more than three stitches.”

“Why the hell doesn't she go to the physician's in Well Lane?” Leo barged over to a narrow wooden door in the corner of the busy tavern.

“Same reason no one else does.” Kore came out of the door, strapped up thumb and bandaged ribs. “Physician Sillix is a dick.” She winced slightly and managed to step up to sit on a barstool. “Ale please Dresk and one for Leo. Ouch you bugger.”

“Kore I didn't come here to get drunk in celebration with you.” Leo sat on another stool.

“What? Well why the hell not? I was awesome!” Kore lifted up her arms and shouted and the inn erupted into roaring cheers and applause. “Big, greasy ape with a shield and chains. He had no chance, the big lummoX.” This was one of Kore's main advantages in the arena, her speed. “He couldn't have been more predictable with that chain if he had you timing it for him, Leo. Swing, one two three, swing, one two three. As regular as the power cuts. Once I ducked under that a swift boot in the nadders persuaded him to drop the shield.” Another tactic of Kore's, she took full advantage of the anatomical differences of the sexes to inflict pain, and always had from a very young age. “You'll never believe this Leo! He tried to swipe at me with a twenty foot chain while I was standing less than six inches from him!” Kore whooped a laugh and Leo couldn't help but smile. Kore would always be a gladiator. Without the thrill of that barbaric arena, she'd wilt away to nothing. “I'm telling you! I just sidestepped and it wrapped him up like dressed corpse!” Kore laughed.

“And the cut? Chain wounds don't need three stitches in a line. Your bandage has slipped.” Leo pulled the dressing back over his sister's injury.

“Ah it's nothing.” Kore buried her face in her pot of ale.

“Oh go on Kore, tell him. He looks like he needs the laugh.” Shawn moved over to stand next to Kore, a bit more next to Kore that was really necessary. The big gladiator made no secret of his fancy for Kore and the poor man had tried his luck often. He still hadn't got the message that Kore was just 'one of the lads'. “She fell on a short-sword in the cells.” Shawn smirked.

“Who's short-sword? You big ape!” Kore laughed. “Tell me Leo, what do you do when you stagger out of that arena all exhausted and sweaty? You drop on a cell bunk, that's what. So where did numb nuts here leave his blade? Go on have a guess.”

“Shawn! You irresponsible clod!” Leo said angrily. “She could have been killed! I honestly don't see why you see the funny side of that Kore.”

“I know you don't.” Kore sighed then smiled. “That's why you're living in Blue Lane now.” She took her brother's hand. “Leo I'm fine and if ever I'm not, a herd of wild horses couldn't keep me from coming for my brother.”

“Kore there's a job coming up in the Connicus household.” Leo said quickly. Kore sighed and let go of Leo's hand. “Not a maid or anything like that, more of a ... teacher.”

“Teaching sword skills in the house of Connicus?” Kore rose her eyebrows.

“Er ... well no. Teaching meditative discipline to Lady Connicus' pregnant daughter. She wants ...”

“Two more ales please Dresk!” Kore shouted loudly.

“Kore at least think about it!” Leo said in exasperation. “It’s a very good position and I can get you on the short-list, down to the last three applicants.”

“Do I look like a midwife-come-nanny? No Leo, I’m surprised you asked.” Kore grabbed her beer pot.

“You’re twenty years old Kore and you’ve achieved here what most people couldn’t achieve in fifty years. Twenty, that’s all. Will you still be here in another twenty or thirty years? Is this all you want?” Leo said desperately.

“And sitting hushing the infants of the ruling classes in my nightdress and carpet slippers in twenty years time is preferable? I earn at least eight times as much as a nanny, or ... mental guru ... would earn.” Kore snapped.

“Yes and you’ve sod all to spend it on! Kore you live in a stone hut!”

“A big stone hut that we built ourselves, not bought from some poncey landowner.”

“You don’t have to stay here.” Leo said miserably. He knew that he’d never persuade his sister to leave the Pit and he’d never persuade her away from her life.

“I know.” Kore smiled. “I can’t do anything else Leo and you know it. You left here because you weren’t suited to it. Why would you want to take me into something at which I’m certain to fail? I’ll reach eligibility for an instructor’s certificate soon.”

“Yep and you’ll stay right here perpetuating it, just like Blacklock. We owe Blacklock everything, I know that so don’t glare at me but we came here because we had no choice Kore. People aren’t forced here any more” Leo had had this argument so many times with his sister.

“So why do they still come here Leo? Answer me that. I’ll tell you why. Because the alternatives for citizens who aren’t DeGaise are still the brothels, the streets or dogs for the so called higher classes. You’re the one that’s unique Leo, you’re bound to see that? If it wasn’t for your genius intelligence and your diplomacy and a hefty dose of the miraculous, you’d be washing the feet of some fat Administrator somewhere. You’re the one in a million here, it simply doesn’t work like that for the huge majority of other people. I perpetuate it you said? If it gives people even a shred of dignity, no matter how dangerous it is, then you bet your bollocks I’ll perpetuate it.”

“Hefty dose of gladiator money and freedom pass. You missed those.” Leo reminded Kore of exactly how he was where he was today.

“My money, my pass. No one took them from me Leo so stop beating yourself up, it’s pathetic and I know you’re doing it on purpose to get sympathy. I’m a frigging gladiator! Are we noted for sympathy? Dresk!” Kore banged her pot on the counter.

“Hey I was before you wench.” A huge bear-like man with a black beard, bald head and an eye patch bellowed at Kore and waved his beer pot at her.

“As far as evolution in general goes, I seriously doubt it.” Leo turned round to look at this ogre. Boffin or not, Leo had still trained as a gladiator and had still been raised in the harsh lifestyle of the Pit. Kore snorted a laugh. “I’m sure Dresk has it under control, there’s no need to roar and salivate all over the inn. Dresk? I think this man was here before us.”

“Was he hell.” Kore sniffed and waved her pot at Dresk just to exasperate Leo. Leo glowered at his

annoying sibling. “Nice brew is this Dresk, you pass it yourself? Literally?”

“I said I was here first.” The ogre growled in Kore's face and she got a very unsavoury view of his multicoloured teeth stumps. “Even your squeeze here agreed with me.” Kore reasoned that his unpatched eye must have been as useless as his patched one if he'd missed the family resemblance between herself and Leo. “You want to give her a few slaps, man.” He advised Leo. “Keep the bitch in her place.”

“I think you should take your drink and go and sit back down.” Leo said darkly. “Your mother is looking for you over there.” The ogre was in the company of another ogre with a similar black bushy beard. Kore snorted yet another laugh and Leo turned to glare at her again.

“What?” She objected. “It's you making me laugh. Hey bog-breath! How's your arse for cracking nuts?” It took at least three minutes for the massive man to catch on to the insult, during which time Leo had drawn his daggers and Blacklock hoisted Kore off her stool and behind the bar out of the way. “Hey!” Kore squealed as the fight began. The hairy man had a club that was almost as big as Kore was.

“No you don't.” Blacklock stated flatly. “You have a match tomorrow and you're cut. Stay here or I'll knock you out myself. Leo's fine.” Leo was indeed fine, so much so that the patrons, and the proprietor carried on regardless once they knew he had the situation in hand. “You really are an aggravating little shit Kore.” Blacklock helped himself to some ale. “One of these days he's going get fed up of you.” He nodded to where Leo had disarmed the ogre, Shawn having retrieved the dropped club.

“Pfft. He knows I can look after myself Blacklock, he knows he doesn't have to brawl like that to protect me.” Kore nodded her approval at Leo.

“No of course he doesn't have to, but he still does. You're a snotty brat at times Kore.” Blacklock allowed Kore out from behind the bar while Dresk hauled the two bearded gents out into the street. “Kore, about tomorrow. I'd rather you were uncut when you're up against an unknown. I could get Shawn in there instead.”

“What? Don't you dare!” Kore exploded. “I'll take him, unknown or not.”

“What's the problem?” Leo asked in concern as he re-pocketed his daggers. “Is she in danger? Shut it Kore, I wasn't asking you. Blacklock?”

“Probably not.” Blacklock answered vaguely. “Unknown opponent, that's all. Some visiting dignitaries with their pet thug.”

“A pet thug that doesn't really have the luxury of choosing his or her opponent I presume?” Leo asked.

“Leo, leave it will you?” Kore said in irritation. “Just leave it. Blacklock just made a suggestion that's all. Stop trying to run the show, please.”

“OK what's the story?” Leo sighed and sat down. “Who is it and why are you so eager to go even though you're injured? Your greed is so disgusting at times Kore.”

“Actually it's not her fault, don't be hard on her Leo.” Blacklock put in.

“Blacklock shush. Yep I'm a greedy sow so let's leave it at that.” Kore glared holes through her instructor.

“No chance. Out with it Blacklock, please. Something's up and if I have to go to that revolting arena myself to find out then I will.” Leo said firmly.

“This posh knob family with the pet ape are guests of Governor Toller.” Kore gave Blacklock a withering look for opening his big mouth. “Talk of entertainment lead Ambassador Knoss to assert that his champion could beat the arena champion. Toller thought not and for the only time in my entire life, I agree with the reptile.”

“Toller wouldn't know his arse from his elbow, let alone who the arena champion is. I could pass Shawn off as the champion Kore, he looks more credible than you do anyway.” Blacklock realised he wasn't going to be able to keep both twins happy here, he also realised he maybe should have kept his mouth shut in front of Leo. The man worried all day and every day about his sister and always had.

“Oh he does eh?” Kore snarled at Shawn who was busy playing cards. “Drop it Blacklock, you too Leo. If this oaf is as good as his master says he is then I want him. OK?”

“Kore get off your cloud will you? No one wants your throne.” Leo said in annoyance.

“Good. They aren't going to get it. Having said that there are a few that really do try, and try very hard. I'm the best Leo. Shawn's good, very good, but I'm better. If this champion of theirs injures or kills Shawn then I'll have to handle that, knowing that I wouldn't have been hurt at all if he hadn't taken my place. Had it been someone who's worth and skills we know, he could have gladly taken the purse, and the glory.” Kore stood up and marched over to sit with Shawn. Leo cringed and swore under his breath.

“How unknown is he Blacklock? I know, I can't run the show, I don't want to. She's my bloody sister.” Leo exhaled loudly.

“Totally. He's staying up at the guest house, probably in the shed or somewhere, with the Ambassadors. No one's seen him, or her. Shows how much we know when we don't even know the gender of it.” Blacklock frowned. “Leo, she's trained to handle unknown opponents. It isn't all set strategies and she knows it.”

“And the crowd will be huge.” Leo heaved. “Lady Toller's birthday isn't it? I'm not completely uninformed Blacklock.”

“Advantage. Kore thrives on crowds, always has.” Blacklock shrugged.

“Yes she's a show-off. Kore! How about getting your ale soaked face out of that pot and staggering off home? Unless you want to add a raging hangover to your list of handicaps tomorrow.” Leo smiled at his sister. She'd be fine, she always was. Like she said, she was the best. “Is Shawn not fighting tomorrow then?” He asked Kore when she came to the bar to return her empty pot, shaking her head at Dresk in refusal of a refill.

“No he's standing second for me. He always does if he's free.” Kore told her brother. That meant he'd be checking her sword, shield and armour and securing anything that needed secured in order to increase protection. Leo had often baulked at the fact that Kore always wore brown leather armour only, while her bigger opponents wore chain or even scale-mail. She always went visor-less too and on the occasions that she did wear head protection, it was little more than a padded leather

mesh rather than a helmet. At least her equipment would be in the best order possible under the charge of Shawn.

“He's a good man Kore.” Leo observed as they left the ale house. Kore nodded. “He thinks a lot of you, you know that.”

“As I do him. Don't go there Leo.” Kore laughed. “Come on, think about it! Do gladiators make good spouses? I tend to think not. Shawn's OK where he is, in my heart as a friend.” Kore stood with her brother by the open iron gates. It was starting to get dark and lights were beginning to blink on around Azoria, apart from in the Pit. “I'll contact you after the match tomorrow Leo. Stop fussing about.” She smiled at her brother.

“I'll fuss all I like. I'm five minutes older than you are, I'm entitled to.” Leo hugged Kore. “Be careful.” Kore nodded and watched her brother walk off down the shadowed lane that lead from the Pit to the blinking lights of the rest of the Third Quarter.

“I have my own lights.” Kore swung herself up on to one of the massive stone gateposts and sat on it's flat top. It didn't take her long to find the two stars she was looking for, they never moved far. One was a shimmering pink and the other one was a twinkling blue and they looked so close together from down there. After their mother had died Leo had told her that the two stars were their parents and he told her that they'd look after them both forever. Kore had never forgotten Leo's words and she'd never forgotten how much comfort that explanation had brought to her young mind. “We'll be OK mum, you taught us well. See how Leo fusses? I blame you for that.” She smiled. “I dare say Leo blames you for my stubborn streak, dad, as well as my sword arm. I think your seeds got a bit confused somewhere there.” She looked out over the silhouetted buildings. All those people out there and just about every one of them had been to the arena. They'd seen Kore fight dozens of times and applauded and cheered for her as much as her fellow gladiators did. “All those people yet even with Leo's love and attention I feel so lonely at times. Why? Even sitting in a bar full of my colleagues I still sometimes feel so isolated and alone and I don't know why.” The stars glittered in the dark night. “Ah hark at me whining. How can loneliness be a part of my life when I have Leo? We'll be just fine. We have each other, we don't need anyone else.” Kore jumped down off the gatepost and landed noiselessly on her feet. “Night mum, 'night dad. I love you.” She turned and walked down the dark, mud-filled street towards her home.

Leo rounded the corner that lead to Blue Lane where he lived in two rooms above the baker's shop. He ducked back round the corner when he recognised a familiar figure at the far end of the street. Honour Felsus was certainly not living up to her given name and was standing in a very obvious and close embrace with another man, Leo thought he recognised the uniform as an Azorian Military uniform but couldn't be certain. Honour had also been embracing Leo for the past three months and had, only yesterday, declared her undying love for him. Hogwash, obviously. Leo sighed and edged along against the wall until he was able to let himself into his home. Another one bites the dust Leo, he thought to himself as he lit his lamps in his tiny room. Actually Honour's inane and shallow nature was irritating in the extreme and Leo had realised almost straight away that maybe he shouldn't have invited her to that dinner three months ago. Even so, she wasn't a bad girl and Leo was quite fond of her. He didn't think he deserved that sort of treatment from her even though Kore had hinted several times, rather heavily, that she was 'up to no good'. He pushed open his small skylight window and looked up at the stars, or rather at two stars in particular.

“Stuffed up again eh?” He smiled at the twinkling pink and blue mass in the sky. “Bloody useless aren't I?” Leo's track record with the fairer sex had never been anything startling, what track record there was. Having said that, he realised that he was only twenty years old and one couldn't really expect him to be considering settling down and raising a family, in fact the thought of that made

him cringe. “Impudent sow carrying herself on right on my doorstep.” He sniffed. “Ah who cares eh? I’m OK. I have Kore to panic about anyway. We have each other, we don’t need anyone else.” Leo closed the window. “’Night mum, ’night dad. I love you.” He undressed and climbed into his narrow, wooden bed and wished Honour Felsus all the luck that was coming to her.

Chapter 5

Kore stood in the tunnel of the arena, outside the cells, and looked down at the dead body that lay covered, on a wooden stretcher.

“That shouldn't have happened.” She sniffed back the tears. “That should never have been a death match.”

“No it shouldn't.” Shawn said angrily from Kore's side. “I'd like to be there when Blacklock gets his hands on Glynnus Jasper. Why the hell did the arsehole kill her? He had her disarmed for shit's sake! That should have been an end to it.”

“He owed her money Shawn, nothing more. She demanded it back to buy grain for her land. Obviously Jasper didn't have it.” Kore spat.

“And now he'll also get the land too. Shit-bag..” Shawn said in disgust. This practice had long ceased in the gladiator ways. The days of villager fighting villager for possessions had passed away when there was no longer the restraints to keep the villagers in the Pit.

“She said only last night that she was out of condition.” Kore smiled sadly. “She told Leo she was getting flabby. Poor Bride. Her spear?” Shawn handed Kore Bride's weapon and Kore lay it across her body. “Rest with the gods Bride, they have a place for you, I know it.” She nodded to the two men carrying the pallet and they proceeded down the tunnel. “I bet that's put the crowd in a fine frenzy.” Kore said glumly.

“It has. Bloodthirsty arseholes. How's those stitches?” Shawn began to tighten armour around her body.

“As pissed off as the rest of me, I'd imagine.” Kore muttered. “I'm fine Shawn. You sound like Leo.”

“And you sound like Blacklock. Go on, they're waiting for you.” Shawn handed Kore her circular, studded shield, the only one the five foot two gladiator could carry without it becoming a hindrance.

The arena was full to the brim and they were mainly higher strata of citizens, thanks to Lady Ursus Toller's birthday festivities as organised by her husband, Governor Spence Toller. Kore raised her shield and her sword and the crowd let out a deafening roar.

“Where's our gladiator?” Spence Toller asked a uniformed captain at his side and looked towards the tunnel.

“That is our gladiator, Sir.” Captain Vespus Creed replied.

“What? Who is? That child?” Toller asked in disbelief. “Don't be absurd Creed.”

“She's twenty, Sir, and she's been the ring champion for eight months this time and quite a few times before that too. She's very good Sir.” Creed explained.

“Yes but the Knoss' champion is Nellatian! I'll be a laughing stock.” Nellatia was the only continent who's native people were markedly different to everyone else. The men stood, on average, at seven and a half feet and the women only marginally smaller. They all had red or auburn hair in varying shades and they all had exceptional strength that was peculiar to their race. It was very rare indeed for a Nellatian to actually leave Nellatia at all, let alone in the occupational role of someone's 'pet thug'. Creed was astonished to say the least. He'd never seen a Nellatian in all his forty two years.

“Sir can I have permission to go to the cells down there? They were obviously unaware that the Knoss champion was a native Nellatian. This will be a serious mismatch.” Creed said in concern.

“Too late.” Toller nodded towards the tunnel where the huge Nellatian carrying a massive broadsword had to duck to clear the roof on the way into the arena. “Oh well, maybe just as well it's like this. Perhaps anything less than a fatality would be a bit of a let-down after that last show.” He shrugged.

“Yes Sir.” Creed said stiffly. He didn't mind a bit of gladiatorial entertainment himself but the Governor's cold attitude was quite shocking. Creed had just come off duty guarding a cold-blooded psychopath in the form of Loram DeGaise, now it seemed he was bodyguard to another.

Kore blinked at her opponent in astonishment. She'd only ever seen pictures of the Nellatians in books! This particular one was at least seven feet nine and was as wide as Kore was tall. His broadsword alone must have weighed almost as much as Kore did. She was gaping, open-mouthed at Shawn who was standing in the tunnel mouth, when the huge Nellatian let out an ear-perforating roar and came at Kore like a solid wall.

He was also much more agile and fast than his height would have people believe and kept up with Kore as she ducked to the side and spun round behind the huge man. He swung sideways at Kore with his huge blade and she was forced to roll to the ground and flip backwards to avoid being slashed in half completely. Still the giant strode towards her. Kore kept low and dived towards the big man. She had no chance of injuring this one in the groin area but it did bring her inside the arc of his vicious blade. Kore drove the edge of her shield into the man's abdomen by swinging it over her head and as he pitched forward slightly, she rolled through his legs and slashed a nasty gash across the back of his calf muscle. The Nellatian roared in rage and whirled round on Kore with surprising speed and hacked downwards. Kore skipped backwards but wasn't fast enough to avoid the tip of the sword as it ripped through her breastplate as though it were an evening gown she was wearing. This was followed by the huge giant lifting his booted foot and almost decapitating Kore as he kicked her under the chin. She fell sprawling across the dirt covered ground and rolled on to her side, spitting out a mouthful of blood. It was the shadow of the massive sword that she saw first and managed to quickly roll the other way and spring to her feet. The giant's blade made a four inch deep dent in the ground where Kore had been lying. He raised his weapon for another vicious hack and Kore sprang forward with all her strength. Her sword found the soft flesh on the big man's underarm and he flailed round widely, dislodging Kore, but not the sword. He now had two swords, Kore had only a shield. Again she jumped forward inside the arc of the blades and drove her fist into the wound her sword had left under the giant's arm. She winced slightly as her arm sank into the spongy flesh up to her wrist. The Nellatian howled in agony and dropped Kore's short-sword to try and grab Kore. Kore swung on to the back of the huge man and her arm made a sickly squelching sound as it was pulled out of the bleeding wound. With both legs locked round the man's neck, Kore threw herself sideways and forward. Luckily the huge Nellatian was off balance and the weight of Kore's swinging momentum sent him staggering forward, falling heavily onto his head. Kore grabbed her sword from the ground and prepared to slash at the man's sword arm. Something was wrong. The massive man was lying on his side and was shaking and twitching from head to foot. Kore glanced at the broad-sword before standing on the man's wrist. He dropped the weapon

straight away, as though he hadn't been aware he was holding it. Kore looked at the man's face and saw his eyes were rolled back so only the whites showed and he was foaming at the mouth. She kicked the broad-sword out of reach and approached her fallen opponent warily. He didn't even know she was there.

"He's sick!" Kore shouted towards Governor Toller and his wife. "He's ill! It's over!"

"It's over when I say so. Carry on." Toller shouted back. Uncertain murmurs rippled around the arena. It was obvious that the Nellatian was fitting quite severely.

"I'll not fight this man in this condition." Kore knelt down beside the giant. "Can you hear me?" She peered into his contorted face. "Shit. It's OK, you'll be OK. Can someone help down here?!" She began loosening the man's armour from his neck and chest, then she pushed his chin up to straighten his airways. "Can you hear me? Help's on it's way. Or at least it had better be." Kore used her own shield to wedge under the Nellatian's neck to support his head then held on to his shoulder to keep him on his side and slightly forward. "Shawn! Thank the Stars." The other gladiator appeared beside Kore. "He's having some sort of seizure." The Nellatian wasn't shaking as violently as he had been but his eyes were still rolled back and he was still frothing at the mouth.

"The sweepers are on their way." Shawn referred to the men who carried the pallets bearing the injured or dead out of the arena.

"He needs Blacklock." Kore moved the man's tangle of red hair away from his mouth. "Can you hear me now? You're going to be OK." She stood up and let the sweepers heave the huge man onto the pallet and stagger off towards the tunnel with it. "Come on Shawn, we'll ..."

"Void match!" Toller was on his feet. "The overseers will release another gladiator. Clear the arena except for the defending champion!"

"Is he mad?" Shawn said in surprise.

"Showing off in front of his visitors. It's OK Shawn, I'm fine." Kore picked up her sword and Shawn followed the sweepers into the tunnel. Her next opponent was a woman of around her own age who lasted all of ten minutes. Not many fighters of twenty years had the experience to match up with Kore.

"Void match!" Toller yelled again and Kore just looked at him in disbelief. "Next gladiator!"

"Sir?" Creed was also rather surprised. "We do have other match-ups Sir. The other gladiators have scheduled opponents, as organised by the overseers."

"That's my champion is it not? All she's done today is defeat a useless wench and a feeble minded foreigner." Toller said. "My wife expects to be entertained, as do my guests over there."

"Actually Spence I'd rather go home and wait for the banquet." Ursus Toller was as white as a sheet. She'd argued for days against this particular part of her birthday tribute. She hated this arena and it made her stomach churn just to think of it's activities. Ursus had actually spent the afternoon here with her face hidden behind the hood of her cape. She hadn't seen any part of the aggressive action at all.

"Rubbish. How ungrateful are you Ursus?" Toller snapped.

"Spence this may have been entertainment in your day but it's not my idea of fun. Please may we

leave?" Ursus was thirty one today, that was eleven years younger than her governor husband. She'd been married off to Spence by her cash-strapped family at the age of eighteen and she'd been miserable ever since. Her family was no longer short of money, thanks to the trade off and the War's end, yet Ursus was still stuck here in this loveless arrangement and had been all but forgotten about by her family. Toller gave his wife a dirty look and nodded at the overseers to bring another opponent for his champion.

Kore was tiring rapidly and she adopted defence tactics against her next male opponent, armed with a shield and an iron claw-hook. She vaguely recognised the man as a citizen of the Pit, probably a patron of Dresk's ale house.

"Just play along Kore." The man obviously knew who Kore was anyway. "I'll drop you, you lose the sword, roll, lose the shield and I'll pin you."

"And win me? No chance." Kore grinned and pushed her way forward with her blade against the man's shield. "I've seen you in the ale house, I think. Keep your guard up on your left side, that's atrocious you fool." She kned her opponent in his exposed rib area just to emphasise the point.

"Point taken. Thanks. Name's Vallen." Vallen tried to power Kore back by sheer strength seeing as he was twice the size of her.

"The Nellatian, has he recovered?" Kore swivelled underneath Vallen's claw, and booted him in the kidney's with her instep, knocking the wind from him.

"Ooof! Shit! He will." Vallen wheezed. "I was told smugness was you weak point." He jutted his shield upwards and jolted Kore's elbow, sending her shield at an outward angle, allowing him a knee to her ribs. "Keep your guard up, that's atrocious." Kore was getting quite a liking for this gladiator and made a mental note to mention him to Blacklock. Kore turned her automatic reflex to protect her ribs into a all out spear that connected the top of her head squarely with Vallen's groin. The gladiator doubled up with pain and sank to his knees.

"I don't need to be told about your weakness, you're male." Kore laughed before forcing Vallen face down on the ground with her knees and holding the flat of her sword under his chin in a lock, for the benefit of the crowd. "I think that's a pin." She shouted amid the roar of the crowd. Both gladiators got to their feet and turned towards the governmental box, as per tradition. "Come on you little weasel, next act please, I'm exhausted."

Toller watched the two gladiators facing him. He'd been quite impressed with the blond girl who he originally thought was a child.

"She will attend the banquet tonight." He announced. Lady Toller just looked at him in disgust and Creed looked at him in despair.

"Spence there's a whole brigade of young girls there tonight, I don't think we need bother with people from here." Ursus tried not to sound too angry. It was bad enough he was going to humiliate her with the dancing girls who were attending already, as he always did, let alone with a grimy gladiator girl.

"I don't want a brigade, I want that one." The Governor narrowed his eyes at his wife and set his jaw. "Do you want the other one? He's quite well put together?" Ursus shook her head. She had absolutely no desire to share her husband's polygamous hobbies despite her many years of celibacy, something which she wasn't adverse to at all in her marriage to Spence. He probably wouldn't even remember inviting this girl after he'd soaked up a few jars of wine. "Don't say I didn't offer. Creed,

get her to the Villa tonight and for pity's sake get her cleaned up a bit.” Toller sniffed.

“Sir, I really do think you should hear Lady Toller. Your fine banquet isn't really the place for gladiator ruffians.” Creed said quickly. He'd known what was coming and had considered trying to slope off into the crowd. How in hell was he going to get a gladiator to the Governor's Villa if she didn't want to go? As for cleaning her up, he doubted even a trained soldier such as himself would come out unscathed were he to try and transform this one into a satin clad ornament befitting the Governor's banquet.

“My fine banquet, exactly. Make sure she's there, and presentable.” Toller stood up and the rest of his entourage followed suit. Captain Creed watched them leave then turned to watch the two gladiators vacate the ring for the next match. Maybe she'd be pleased to be invited? Creed tried to convince himself knowing full well that there wasn't a chance in hell that she'd be pleased. Toller had just forced two unscheduled fights on her for a start and if she was a typical gladiator, then her opinion of the government in general would be far from high. He left the arena feeling very glum indeed.

Creed didn't think it wise to approach the gladiator girl in the arena cells, nor would it be wise to go wandering around the Pit looking for her later. He decided to go and wait for her outside the iron gates of the village. Creed tried to make a quick detour down a side street when he saw a yellow dressed, ringlet-headed figure bouncing towards him. This woman was a prime example of why one should not to judge a book by it's cover. She was very pretty indeed and clean and tidy but Creed had never met such a flutter-brain in all his life. The girl simply could not hold a conversation to the end at all and sprang from one topic to another so rapidly that it had given the Captain a headache and that was only after one evening with her. He really didn't need chatter of how ghastly so-and-so looked at dinner the other night and what the latest clothes trends were in Azoria.

“Vespus!” Creed cringed and turned round to face Honour Felsus. “You look so smart in your uniform.”

“Honour, how nice.” Creed forced a smile. “I'm sorry I can't stay and chat just now, I'm on duty, and a job for the Governor.”

“You work too hard.” Honour pouted. “And you'll be leaving me all alone tonight too while you go and party up at the Villa.”

“Well hardly, Honour. I'm on duty.” Creed said irritably. “Look, I really do have to go. I'll send a message to you when I'm ...oof!” He'd turned round and collided with someone who was hurrying down the side street, sending a hundred sheets of writing all over the ground around them. “I'm so sorry, that was my f ... shit!” He came face to face with the face. The face he'd just seen not thirty minutes ago in the arena.

“Not at all.” Leo started to pick up his texts, looking evenly at Honour. “Good afternoon Miss Felsus.”

“Leo! Must you sneak around after me all the time? Captain Creed was just telling me about the birthday banquet up at the Villa tonight. I don't think I'd like to go.” Honour said casually.

“No, I'd say not.” Leo said absently, standing up. “I'm sorry if I startled you, I can assure you I wasn't sneaking anywhere. I live round the corner, remember? Good day Miss Felsus, Captain.” Leo nodded politely and continued his way home to deposit his work before going to the Pit to check up on Kore.

“Who ... who was that?” Creed stammered in shock.

“Oh no one.” Honour answered brightly. “I rather think he has a fancy for me but I can't help that really can I? So how long ...”

“Honour! Who is he? What's his name, I mean. Please Honour it's important.” Creed said seriously.

“I only met him a couple of times.” Honour whimpered. Creed sighed wearily. As though he cared!

“I believe you. No, I'm not angry or anything like that, I think I recognise him from somewhere, that's all, but I can't think where.” Creed semi lied. It wasn't actually him he recognised, but her.

“Well his name is Leo. He works in the library.” Honour said sulkily. She wasn't at all impressed about Vespus' attention being diverted by Leo. “Just a book-keeper though, I doubt you know him.”

“Do you know anything about him Honour? Family and so forth?” Creed pressed. Honour looked very uncertain and very confused at this sudden interest in her ex lover, brief ex lover at that. “If I can get this all sorted then I may be able to finish early this evening.” Creed actually felt a bit bad about manipulating Honour like that but he had to know if this librarian and that gladiator were related. He had more chance using the librarian to get to the gladiator than he had of ever getting the gladiator to do as he needed.

“You will?” Honour's face brightened straight away. “Well all I know is that he's twenty years old, works in the library and has a twin sister, but we won't mention her. She's no good.” Honour pulled a face.

“No good? So he doesn't get along well with his twin? How is she no good?” Creed badgered.

“He gets along too well with his twin.” Honour said moodily. “In fact everything the man does revolves round his damned twin.” Creed felt like dancing! Even better if they were as close as this. “She's a dirty gladiator. Can you believe that? Ugh.” Honour said in disgust.

“Revolted.” Creed agreed. “Absolutely despicable. Excuse me Honour, I really do need to get going.” He tried to get passed the young woman.

“Going where? Vespus you weren't going in that direction. Vespus! Oh damn!” Honour stamped her foot and watched the soldier dash round the corner into Blue Lane.

Kore crouched on the floor beside the recovering Nellatian fighter. Blacklock had ensured that he was in no danger of swallowing his tongue or otherwise injuring himself, and stood with him while the man's seizure ran its course. He was now lying on his side, covered in a woollen blanket looking very confused indeed.

“Why is that family fighting him if he's prone to fits?” Kore said angrily.

“Greedy, selfish people Kore, that's why. I bet he's made them a fortune, despite the seizures. Nellatians aren't noted for fighting but they bloody well can if they need to. Not too bright upstairs though.” Blacklock tapped his head with his finger. “He wouldn't have taken much luring away by a few gold coins. Poor Man.”

“He could be killed at any time in that arena.” Kore snapped. “It was my throwing him on his head that seemed to set it all off.”

“Jyp.” The big giant slurred in a deep, rumbling voice. “Me is called Jyp.”

“Hello.” Kore turned to face the Nellatian. “I'm Kore. Are you feeling a bit better? You're still in the arena, your people haven't been for you yet.”

“Them's won't. Jyp find way back to big housey.” Jyp tried to stand up and held his head. “Is shite inside skull. Thanking you Little Lady.” He grinned widely at Kore. “Little Lady is very good Nellatian man.”

“Thank you.” Kore laughed. “I'll presume that's a compliment. Blacklock he can't go back to the guest villas by himself, he's still ...”

“Useless.” A tall, thin man of around fifty with wiry grey hair stood in the doorway of the cell.

“Excuse me?” Kore got to her feet. “And you are?”

“Plovus Knoss. I own this liability.” Knoss wafted his hand at Jyp.

“Oh I see.” Kore said flatly and Blacklock and Shawn both winced and took a few steps backwards. “Is he a liability when he's not sick?”

“That's none of your business. Come on you.” Knoss nudged Jyp with his foot.

“He can't. He's not well enough.” Kore stood between Knoss and his 'liability'. “Blacklock here is the arena physician.” She lied.

“Does it matter if he's well enough?” Knoss sighed in exasperation. “He's no use in the arena any more. Lady Knoss wants him put to work in the gem mines on Killian. He's to be sold so get out of my way girl.” Blacklock and Shawn visibly flinched.

“If he's not fit enough for the arena what in blue buggery makes you think he's fit enough to have a few weights of onyx dropped on his head every ten minutes?” Kore snarled. The Killian gem mines were notoriously horrible. They were mined by criminals who served their time there until they died on the job, and even then they didn't leave it, they were unceremoniously dumped in the nearest hole.

“That won't be our concern after he's sold and that's something we won't can do if you don't stop making such a fuss.” Knoss wafted his hand in Kore's face.

“You don't want me to make a fuss, believe me.” Kore rasped. “You're not taking him from here until he's well enough to seek employment on his own.” Knoss started to laugh.

“Oh you silly wench. He belongs to me, don't you understand? He's my property! He doesn't seek anything for himself, only what I tell him to seek and tell him to do. On your feet Jyp, I've wasted enough time here.” Knoss went to grab Jyp and Kore kneed his arm away from the fighter.

“I could have you arrested for that, you rat.” Knoss snarled.

“You could, yes, if you could manage to run to the military with two broken legs. What's the going rate for slaves these days? I thought that was illegal, even on Killian. Don't spout the law to me Knoss, I've spent all my life avoiding it. Fifty gold? Seventy? Maybe more seeing as he's Nellatian, or maybe less seeing as he's sick. Oh excuse me, you weren't going to announce his illness to your

buyers were you? Me and my big mouth. It'll get me in trouble one of these days, the day you go to sell him actually." Kore smiled at the furious Ambassador.

"He's a burden to us. Can't you see that?" Knoss tried to reason with Kore. "Either let me go and sell him for a reasonable price or buy him yourself. See? Not too sure now are you? You wouldn't want stuck with him eith ..."

"Fifty gold and your bones intact. Blacklock? My purse in yet?" Kore took a small pouch from Blacklock. "Don't look so shocked Ambassador. I've made more today with my two unscheduled fights than you do in a week." Kore smiled and dropped fifty gold coins on the bunk next to Jyp. "His papers?" Knoss handed over Jyp's documents in an utter daze. What had just happened? He'd sold his gladiator to a gladiator? How? "Here you are Jyp, these are yours. Either keep them safe in your body-belt there or burn them."

"You ... you ... he's ..." Knoss gaped at the papers in the Nellatian's hands as much as the Nellatian did.

"As free as you are Knoss. You might want to go away before he gets rid of his headache and decides he doesn't like you any more." Kore smirked. Knoss actually ran out of the cell and up the tunnel. Kore, Shawn and Blacklock fell into fits of laughter.

"Little Lady have buyded Jyp?" Jyp looked from his papers to the three laughing gladiators in astonishment.

"Yep!" Kore smiled. "Then gave you your papers. You're a free man Jyp."

"Ooo!" Jyp grinned broadly. "Is good! Jyp goes wherever Jyp liking now?" He asked.

"Indeed you can. As long as you take care not to hurt yourself, your seizures should be quite easy to manage." Blacklock told him.

"Oh them's crap and rubbish." Jyp waved his hand dismissively. "Jyp going where Jyp please now so Jyp go with Little Lady anyhoo."

"Huh?" Kore stopped laughing. "Er ... I'm not going anywhere though Jyp. I don't travel around like the Knoss family do. I stay here all the time." She explained.

"Is good. Jyp not wanting nothings to be as same as Knoss do. Jyp stay with Little Lady." Jyp decided.

"Looks like you got yourself a bodyguard." Blacklock grinned. "Leo will faint."

"Leo! Shit! Look he'll be over at the Pit faster than lightning. I can't just ... just ... introduce Jyp to him all of a sudden." Kore said in a panic. Leo would certainly faint, Blacklock was right. "Shawn will you take him somewhere for a few hours? Anywhere at all?"

"Training fields? He can help me erect the apparatus course." Shawn offered.

"Yes!" Kore said in relief.

"How's about no?" Jyp said firmly. "Jyp staying with Little Lady, not with Shoon. Free man remembering?"

“Gah! Jyp I'm meeting my brother, you see, and we need to talk in private about something. Shawn is my best friend and he really does need a hand with putting up that apparatus.” Kore tried.

“Little Lady using apparatus?” Jyp asked.

“All the time! This is new apparatus and I can't wait to try it out.” Kore said eagerly.

“OK well and good.” Jyp nodded. “Shite head is gone soonly. Come along Shoon, Little Lady needing apparatus. Us gets it fixed, no worryings.” Jyp strode out of the cell, Shawn blinked at his back a few times before shrugging and following him.

“Umm, I don't think I thought that through properly.” Kore scowled.

“Gladiator and thought don't go in the same sentence Kore.” Blacklock reminded her. “I'll be here for an hour or two myself, if Leo happens to turn up here. Business with one of the overseers.” He explained vaguely. Kore nodded and collected her belongings together.

Chapter 6

Vespus Creed walked casually over to the Pit's gates when he saw the gladiator approaching them. He'd hidden out of sight but with a good view of the gates, just in case she'd been in the company of other gladiators and was very relieved to see she was alone.

“Excuse me, I need to speak with you.” Creed stood in front of Kore and couldn't help but stare. He'd presumed her stature was exaggerated by the distance he'd been from her, and the size of her opponents in the arena. He was wrong. The woman was tiny! Creed actually peered a few inches closer into her face just to make sure he had the right person.

“I doubt that.” Kore smiled and tried to sidestep the Azorian Captain.

“I came to deliver a verbal invitation from the Governor.” Creed said quickly. He'd decided to give the gladiator the chance to accept the request of her own free will, slim though that chance was. “Governor and Lady Toller request your company at the Villa this evening at the banquet in honour of Lady Toller's birthday.” Kore erupted into laughter and Creed grit his teeth and seethed.

“OK who put you up to it?” Kore looked around herself, and behind Creed. “Either that, or you have the wrong person. Excuse me please Captain.”

“I've just come from your brother's home in Blue Lane.” Creed said as Kore started to walk away. She stopped and turned to face the soldier. “The librarian, Leo. I don't think I have the wrong person. You are his sister, obviously, although I'm unsure of your name even though I've seen you in the arena a hundred times.”

“Which has what to do with my brother?” Kore asked darkly. She could smell a rat a mile off.

“That depends on you miss ... ?”

“Kore. My brother is a librarian, as you said, not a gladiator, and I'm absolutely certain that he isn't going to Lady Toller's party. I don't see the connection so why mention him?” Kore took a few steps towards Creed. Creed smiled smugly. Honour had been right, these two were incredibly close and very protective of one another.

“I mentioned him because I've been asked to look into a few things, namely the smuggling of dissident literature to Plaus. Leo is in a perfect position to carry out such activities and he is not Azorian.” Creed shrugged casually.

“Not DeGaise, you mean.” Kore corrected sharply. “Captain, that is the biggest load of horse-shit I've heard in a very long time.” She laughed. “I presume Leo told you that too.”

“He did, yes, but I still have to research this. I might need Leo to ... vacate his house for a time while I do this.” Creed said meaningfully. “Or I could find other means of investigation that won't affect your brother unless I find anything incriminating.”

“Which you won't. Captain, if you had anything on my brother, he'd be in the jail right now and you

certainly wouldn't be here gossiping with me.” Kore said patiently.

“Actually I don't need anything on him. Potential dissident activity is a very serious matter and one of the few occasions where the Military has the authority to act first, prove or disprove later.” Creed told Kore. He was right too. Yet another stupid law that had, conveniently, not been amended. She glared daggers right through the Captain. “Ah I see we understand each other.” Creed smiled.

“Don't flatter yourself. Let me clarify this. If I don't go to this snobby banquet, you'll go and arrest my brother on the suspicion of dissident activity. Right?” Kore snarled.

“More or less, yes. Oh by the way, Leo doesn't know we have this agreement, you weren't even mentioned, that's why I wasn't sure of your name.” Creed said, as though that was a big favour to Kore.

“We don't have an agreement Captain, I haven't said yes.” Kore snapped. “Why in black hell do they want me there?” Kore was quite astonished at this. “I'm not your typical *débutante*. It's obviously quite important that I'm there too judging by the lengths you're going to to ensure it.” She frowned at the soldier.

“To be honest with you, I'm as surprised as you are.” Creed said truthfully. “All I know is that I was ordered to get you there and a refusal of that order would mean a swift retirement to the out-plains.” Creed shrugged. “I knew there was no chance of you accepting that invitation of your own accord, none at all.”

“Well I thank you for your honesty in telling me that, I suppose.” Kore sighed loudly. “Maybe if you'd offered me that explanation first, before you went to harass my innocent brother, I'd be more approachable. I do understand what it's like to be under orders.” Kore said irritably. It really did annoy her that people presumed that the gladiators needed such a crass incentive to do anything other than fight. This soldier had automatically presumed that intimidation of a family member was the only way to secure Kore's co-operation. He'd never thought for one moment that she could actually reason situations and could appreciate that the Captain was acting under orders.

“Would it have worked? I doubt it and I'm not in the habit of trying to elicit sympathy from gladiators.” Creed said flatly. “I stay with my original plan. I base my method of research into this dissident literature on your decision regarding the Governor's invitation. No, I don't trust you, before you ask. You're to attend the Villa dressed in something a bit more suitable than ... that.” Creed nodded at Kore's attire in general. “You don't show, I pick up Leo at midnight. Good day to you Kore.” Creed nodded and turned to walk away. Kore resisted the urge to draw her sword on him. A Governmental banquet? Were they all insane? Why would anyone want someone like Kore at an upper class function?

“I've a good mind to turn up in my full body armour.” She grumbled, stamping down the lane into the Pit. “What the bloody hell am I supposed to wear?” She ranted. “Dress!” Kore turned back round and headed for the brothel.

Leo spent a good thirty minutes trying to compose himself after Captain Creed had left his house. Dissidents? They still arrested people on suspicion of that? He was quite happy to be 'looked into' as there was absolutely nothing to find, but the fact that the insinuation was there to begin with worried him. Leo had stopped chewing his fingernails down to the skin by the time he'd reached Kore's house. Kore's empty house. He sighed heavily and headed for Dress's Ale House.

Kore brandished her sword at one of the girls in the brothel who'd produced an item of clothing that was more space than fabric.

“OK! I'll try another one!” Jasmine squeaked.

“Good idea and if there's not more too it than a belt's worth I'll drown you in the Lake.” Kore growled.

“I don't understand why you want to cover yourself from head to toe.” Jasmine chattered. She'd never actually seen Kore in the arena, the girls there didn't usually go to such places, but she'd heard all about the famous gladiator and was a big fan none the less.

“Because I'm not a tart.” Kore answered rudely. “That one! No, not that bit of fluff, the blue one behind it.” Kore pointed into Jasmine's wardrobe with her sword.

“Kore that's my nightdress. Could you put your knife away please? I don't really like you waving it about so close to me.”

“Oh. Umm yes, sorry.” Kore re-sheathed her 'knife'. “There's bound to be something in there Jasmine! Here, let me in it.”

“Can I ask where you're going? It might help me find something suitable.” Jasmine looked on in despair as Kore pulled everything out of her wardrobe and dumped it on the floor.

“Party. Bah look at this, there'd be all sorts hanging out! Villa. How big are your feet? I've no shoes either.” Kore picked up a silver sandal of Jasmine's. Jasmine was looking at Kore with her mouth open.

“The party at the Villa? Lady Toller's birthday banquet?” She said in awe.

“Yes and if you tell anyone I'll fillet you.” Kore grumbled. “Ha! Will this one fit me?” She produced a red satin gown with a chiffon waistband. “Yes it will, I'll make sure it does. Shoes?”

Kore delved back into the cupboard and surfaced with a pair of tan coloured plimsolls. “Perfect.” Jasmine took them off her and tutted loudly.

“I wish I got asked to nice places like that.” She said wistfully. “The most up market place I've ever been invited to outside of working is Gisem's steak house on Tower Road. I used to dream that someone would ask me to a fine party then beg me never to come back here.” Jasmine smiled and handed Kore a pair of red slippers. It had never actually occurred to Kore that the girls here were unhappy or dissatisfied.

“How old are you Jasmine?”

“Twenty five. I've been here since I was sixteen, just as the War was ending.” Jasmine shrugged. “I had nowhere else to go, I still don't. I can't do anything else.” Kore had said the exact same thing to Leo about herself. Her and Jasmine were in a very similar situation, when Kore thought about it. The women went to the window when they heard a commotion from the street below.

“Don't be ridiculous Matthius!” Leo's loud voice could be heard all along the street. “Kore wouldn't be in the bloody brothel for shit's sake!”

“Oh no.” Kore winced and Jasmine tried not to laugh.

“Columbus Fry saw her going in! She's in there I tell you!” Matthias the grocer argued.

“Right!” Kore and Jasmine heard the door bang then a silence.

“Is he angry?” Jasmine whispered.

“Yes but not with this place. He thinks I'm five years old at times. Leo! How nice!” Kore smiled widely as her brother barged into the room. “Do you know Jasmine?”

“Huh? Well of course I don't damned well know Jasmine! How do you know Jasmine?” Leo roared.

“We have the same sized feet.” Kore smirked. “Goodbye Jasmine and thanks. I'll return these soon.” Kore picked up her bag of clothes and breezed past her irate brother.

“Return what? Thanks for what?” Leo trotted after Kore as they left the brothel. “Kore! Why were you in there? What have your feet to do with the brothel?”

“I'm going out! Hush Leo, I'm not a complete hermit.” Kore turned the corner and headed for home.

“Well yes you are.” Leo pointed out. “With the exception of Dresk's. Going out where? The brothel?” Leo badgered.

“I'm going to a party for shit's sake! Is that so odd? Hmm?” Kore entered her house and pushed a pile of arm and leg pads off the wooden table with her elbow. “I borrowed a dress.” She upturned the bag over the table. “Pretty isn't it? And shoes.”

“Kore no one in existence has ever seen your legs. What bloody party? And yes, it's very pretty.” Leo lifted the dress up and glanced from it, to his sister. “You don't go to parties.”

“Time I started then isn't it?” Kore said shortly, then sighed. “Leo it's only a party, I'll be fine. I just found out about it today. I swear I'd ask you to come with me if I could, but I didn't give out the invitations.” She took the dress from Leo and smiled at him. It was true, there was no one she'd like with her more than Leo. “I'm not going in the company of anyone else, don't look so worried and I'm certainly not going with Jasmine and the girls, that was just to borrow the dress. I have no nice clothes.”

“OK I'm sorry.” Leo conceded. “I fuss too much, I know. I suppose a party isn't out of the ordinary seeing as you're still the arena champion.” He smiled and Kore just nodded and smiled back. She hated deceiving Leo in any way but she couldn't think of a credible reason at all to explain why she'd accepted an invitation to this particular venue.

“I'll just take the clothes through ...” Kore's sentence was interrupted by the enormous frame of a Nellatian filling the doorway. “Shit.” Jyp looked at Leo, who'd gone white with shock, then at Kore, then back to Leo. He frightened the life out of both of them by leaping at Leo and grabbing him by the front of his tunic.

“How you having Little Lady's face on?” He demanded.

“Jyp! Jyp it's OK ...”

“Will be soonly Little Lady.” Jyp assured her. “Well so? Jyp thinking should give face over here, is not belonging to you.” He shook Leo and Leo's teeth rattled.

“Jyp! No Jyp, put him down!” Kore tried to get between her new friend and her brother. “Shawn you asshole! Come and help me!” Shawn was doubled over with laughter just outside of Kore's house. “Jyp he's my brother!” Jyp eyed Leo suspiciously and Leo tried to nod. “We're twins Jyp. You have twins on Nellatia? Two born at the same time? He's my brother.” Jyp dropped Leo suddenly and nodded.

“OK and fine.” His face broke out into a wide smile at Leo, who was still as white as a sheet. “Me is called Jyp the free man.”

“Er ... good. Well Jyp Freeman, I'm Leo, Kore's brother.” He managed to stammer whilst picking himself up off the floor. “Kore, this better be explainable.” He hissed at his sister.

“It is, honestly.” Kore shoved her borrowed dress in a corner and told Leo how she'd met and 'acquired' Jyp. Jyp nodded proudly and busied himself with the water kettle and tea. “He'll ... look after me.” Kore said awkwardly, watching Jyp with the tea mugs.

“By shaking the rest of the population to death, yes.” Leo muttered. “So are you just going to traipse to this party in your satin dress through the streets of the Pit on your own?”

“Not on your life.” Jyp put a mug down in front of each sibling. “Jyp goes through street with Little Lady. How is satin?” Kore showed Jyp her dress and he was most complimentary and enthusiastic about the whole thing. Kore was beginning to think it might not be such a chore after all either. What harm could a couple of hours worth of free wine and food do? The main thing that had been troubling her was having to leave her weapon at home but if Jyp was going to escort her to the Villa, then presumably back home afterwards, then she wouldn't have to walk through the streets unarmed, a thing she rarely did as it made her feel very vulnerable and only half dressed. “Little Lady needing pretty ribbons in hair also too.” Jyp said thoughtfully and Kore and Leo started to laugh at the huge Nellatian's interest in matters cosmetic.

Faust Cooper swore horribly when his back twinged as he got out of his chair. Some fool was hammering on his door and interrupting his book-reading. Faust had retired five years ago at the age of fifty-five but still couldn't walk past the training grounds or the barracks without stopping to tell them all that they were doing it wrong.

“Ben. Do come ...” Faust got out of the way as Ben darted in anyway. “Who's fiancé are you hiding from this time?” Faust asked the young General Astrella.

“Faust I'd gladly take on a dozen fiancés rather than plough through that chaos out there.” Ben grumbled and helped himself to Faust's beer keg.

“Oh the Tollers' banquet preparations. It's a good skive Ben, just show face at the start of the evening then bugger off to the kitchens with a flagon of ale for the rest of it.” Faust advised.

“If I get that far. Toller's pulled three of the four divisions away from their duties, no matter what they were, to patrol the area round the Villa. It's absolute chaos. The men are standing on one another's toes in that one small area and the rest of the city is all but running riot because there's only division four to patrol the whole lot of it. Gisem's steak house has been trashed over three times in eight hours and a gang of kids have just tipped powdered henna into the barracks' water supply.” Ben sighed and Faust smirked. “Yes it is funny actually. A full division of big beefy men

all with lips as red as the brothel girls!' Ben laughed too. "I've left the other two Generals to it under the huge lie of checking the power supplies to the Villa."

"I had Plovus Knoss here earlier complaining about the unruly behaviour of the residents of the Pit. What's he expect? Silly little fairy. They're bloody fighters! I don't know why he came here but I sent him off in the direction of the Military buildings." Faust rolled his eyes. "They all demand gladiators and all demand to be entertained by them, yet they expect them to suddenly transform into aristocrats once they leave the arena! They should damned well leave them alone if they don't want a fighter's attitude in return."

"You have a lot of sympathy for the gladiators don't you? It's not my idea of entertainment, I have to admit. I've never been to the arena in my life." Ben said.

"I've only been once or twice and that was while on duty. Not my idea of fun either. No, not sympathy for them Ben, respect. I have the utmost respect and admiration for those people and I always have. In all their sad and tragic existence here they've never gone under and never bowed down to the upper crust of Azoria, despite the way they've been treated. They were thrown into the arena as a way of controlling their numbers while providing entertainment and revenue for Azoria. Dispensable playthings Ben, that's all. They refused to be dispensed of, then they flourished. Respect. They deserve every shred of it." Faust drew himself a mug of ale and joined Ben. "They're actually playing the government now and the government don't even see it. Our parliament and our government maintains their place of employment for them, provides smiths and armourers for them and lets them do more or less as they please in their own village. They're hardly ever checked on or looked into in anyway, including revenue. The percentage of wagers on gladiators has never been revised Ben, but the wagers have increased and so has the number of them. The gladiators are bloody loaded and none of them are taxed one coin!" Faust laughed.

"So why do they still live in such slum conditions? If they're that wealthy then why don't they buy decent accommodation, or improve the general standard of the Pit?" Ben was also aware of the situation regarding the gladiators.

"Matter of priorities." Faust shrugged. "Material possessions just aren't highly valued among the gladiators. The Military are very similar so we should be able to understand that. I'm not short of a coin or two myself yet look at this place. It isn't exactly palatial Ben." Faust's home consisted of one room only with a wooden floor and partitioned areas for sleeping and cooking. "They've had no choice but to value their lives and well-being above all else and that still stands today. A gladiator would spend money on a dull, weatherproof tunic, but never a fine silk shirt, no matter how stylish it was."

"Speaking of silk shirts, the Villa will be full to the rafters with them later." Ben heaved. "Boring farts. I remember my parents holding such events just because it was expected of them. Neither of them liked them and always tried to slope off unseen mid way through them." Ben laughed. "My mother had so many 'sudden headaches' that needed my father's ministrations that I'm surprised she was never institutionalised for lifelong research."

"How are your parents?" Faust smiled too. He'd met Lord and Lady Astrella on quite a few occasions and thought very highly of both of them. It wasn't difficult to see why Ben had turned out so well with such agreeable parents.

"Both absolutely fine, or at least they were three months ago when I was in Tibrae. My mother's flair for the Ambassadorial is quite phenomenal, so much so that she actually uses the title of Ambassador rather than Lady. Lord Astrella will always be Lord Astrella, however." Ben rolled his

eyes. "He passed comment on turning over all his trousers to my mother and adopting skirts as his standard dress." Both men laughed loudly. Lily Astrella certainly was a spirited woman, often driving her down to earth and steady-paced husband to distraction. A loud hammering set Faust off swearing again as he winced when he stood up. This time it was a young cadet by the name of Rowan.

"What is this? Divisional barracks?" Faust boomed and the cadet flinched. "Close the door, you're causing a draught." He made his way back to his chair and lowered himself stiffly back into it. "Huh?" Faust looked from the closed door, to Ben. No cadet. "For shit's sake. Is the absence of a brain a Military qualification now? Go let him in Ben, he'll stand out there all day. Imbecile."

"General Faust." Rowan nodded his respect to the retired soldier. "General Astrella, Sir, the crossroads at Lord's Lane and Brewery Road became congested Sir." He said smartly. "As being everyone decided that the main street would be busy so therefore to take the alternate route of Lord's Lane, all at the same time."

"Rowan I'm sure Governor Toller won't miss a few men if they go and redirect traffic for a while." Ben said patiently.

"Well they can't Sir on account of the fire." Rowan looked at the ceiling.

"The fire?" Ben said carefully. "And this fire would be where?"

"At the crossroads of Lord's Lane and Brewery Road Sir. Angus Maxis set blaze to Heddu Perret's cart Sir on account of it being in his way." Rowan explained.

"For Pity's sake." Ben heaved. "Where's Captain Lorette?" Rand wasn't far behind Ben in the military progression ranks. A few more months and he'd be a General, as Ben had been for eighteen months.

"He's arranging flowers Sir." Rowan replied promptly and Faust snorted a laugh from behind Ben. "For the table arrangements, you understand."

"No, nor do I want to." Ben shook his head and heaved a sigh. "No wonder you retired." He said dryly to Faust before following Rowan out of the house.

Chapter 7

Jyp insisted on carrying Kore all the way from the Pit to the gate because of all the mud in the place. He reckoned that any lady, and especially his Little Lady should never get their pretty red slippers muddy. Kore made sure they took the narrow back streets after that as she really didn't want people to see her on her way to Governor Toller's Villa dressed up like a wedding cake, complete with red ribbons that Jyp had 'found'. Kore didn't ask where, and could think of no place at all in the Pit where red ribbons could be obtained.

The Villa was so brightly lit on the outside that it hurt Kore's eyes. The Pit was never this bright, even during the day. The entire well-kept and tidy grounds were surrounded by a high, barbed fence. Fresh green lawns were edged with beautiful, flowering bushes and dotted with fish-filled pools and clean white statuettes. The Villa itself was a huge, square, three story building with pillars at its doorways and balconies at its sparkling, brightly lit windows. Kore found the whole thing rather obscene given the levels of poverty in some areas of Azoria, and there were more of those than the Pit. Jyp found a bush to sit under and no amount of persuasion and reassurance of its non-necessity could make him change his mind and return to the Pit for a few hours. He fully intended to stay exactly where he was until Kore came back out of the Villa.

Two guards stood either side of the massive black painted Villa doors and they looked very surprised to see a young girl wandering up the path alone, dressed for the party.

“Back door.” One of the guards said, thinking she was there as some sort of personal entertainment.

“Your sexual preferences are of no interest to me.” Kore said casually. “I have an invitation from Governor Toller, as delivered by one of his Captains. Thank you.” The other guard guffawed a laugh when he caught on to Kore's crude comment, something which the first guard had no chance of doing. “So can I go in? My name's Kore if you'd like to check up on me.” Guard two nodded at guard one to go and verify Kore's invitation with someone.

“He'll be at least ten minutes, it's chaos in there. I'm Manning.”

“I bet you are.” Kore muttered and sat herself on a low, ornamental wall to wait for her verification.

“So what's the going rate? I just got a raise.” Manning jingled his belt-purse. Kore just looked at him. His comments were all but begging for witticisms but his stupidity meant wit would be wasted.

“Sorry, not for sale.” Kore smiled and wished she had her short-sword handy.

“Oh come on. You girls all have your price.” Manning coaxed.

“What was your mother's?” Kore said nastily. She'd heard enough out of this oaf.

“A few silver pieces but that a while ago.” Manning said seriously and Kore didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I really am an invited guest, Manning." Kore tried. "For some reason the Governor saw fit to ask me here."

"For some reason?" Manning laughed. "Now I wonder what that could be?" Kore was about to start swearing at Manning when the doors opened, unleashing a path of bright yellow light over the wall where Kore was sitting.

"Who passed on this invitation?" Yet another soldier asked her. Kore couldn't see his face clearly as the house lamps were dazzling her eyes.

"One of your Captains." Kore cursed herself for an idiot for not knowing the soldier's name and not having the sense to even ask it of him at the time. "He was at the arena this afternoon with Governor Toller."

"By hell." Soldier muttered. "And your name is Kore?"

"Yes." Kore snapped. "Look, I was invited here and I only accepted with the utmost reluctance. Governor Toller requested my presence but to tell you the truth, I couldn't give a rat's arse. Maybe you want to tell him you wouldn't let me in." Kore spun round to march off down the path to find Jyp.

"Hang on!" The soldier in the doorway shouted and ran after her. "Excuse my caution. I'm sure you understand the security measures we have to employ." Kore stopped marching and glared at the soldier. "My name is General Louis Marx." He said carefully, watching Kore's face very closely indeed.

"I understand." Kore nodded. "Partly my fault too, I didn't ask the Captain his name and that was stupid of me."

"Understandable. You must have been quite excited at the invitation." Marx opened the door for Kore.

"Ecstatic." Kore said sarcastically.

"You said the Captain was at the arena. Were you there too?" Marx fished to confirm his suspicions. Kore started to laugh.

"Possibly, yes. I'm sure the Captain could confirm my invitation." Kore said more politely than she actually felt. The irritation was setting in rapidly.

"Vespus Creed. Yes I'm sure he will." Marx lead her to the gold-set glass doors that stood open to reveal the banquet hall. The room was almost the same size as the entire Pit village and was lavishly furnished with low tables, dark wooden chairs and cushioned beds and couches. The amount of food that Kore saw on one table alone would have fed all of Dresk's customers for a week. "This young lady is a guest, Captain Pape." Marx said to the soldier who was standing just inside the door. "Her name is Kore and she was at the arena this afternoon." He said meaningfully to his Captain. Pape frowned at Kore for a few seconds then his jaw fell open. "I agree, she looks stunning." Marx said quickly before Pape blurted out anything stupid. Kore exhaled loudly and rolled her eyes at all the pomp and ceremony. She was only trying to get to the damned party! She strode off, on her own, in the direction of a table filled with jugs of wine and helped herself to a goblet full. Kore couldn't even remember ever having hold of a goblet before, let alone a solid gold one.

Ursus Toller spotted the tiny, red dressed woman standing in the doorway of the hall and had to take a double take to make sure that it was the same woman she'd seen that afternoon doing battle in the arena. She'd unwrapped her long blond hair from its leather binding and it now fell to her waist. She looked absolutely beautiful in her red, low-cut dress and Ursus' stomach lurched when she thought of her husband and his lecherous reasons for inviting her here. Spence Toller was on his fifth jug of wine by now and was currently underneath a jumble of bare arms and legs on one of the low divan couches. Ursus guessed there to be about five individuals on there but didn't really care enough to do an accurate limb count. Call girls and dancing girls were usually quite happy with obliging the Governor of Azoria's peculiarities but the gladiator girl probably wasn't even aware he had peculiarities. As tough and as streetwise as she may have been, she didn't deserve the humiliation and embarrassment of Spence Toller's advances.

"Hello." Ursus stood next to Kore at the wine table. "May I join you?" Kore just shrugged in reply. "I'm sorry but I didn't see your victories this afternoon. I don't share the Governor's zest for the sport. I hid in my cape." Ursus shrugged back. Kore smiled in amusement when she recognised who her companion was. Lady Ursus Toller. She looked totally different close up and out of her official dress. Her brown hair had been released of its knots and twists and her shiny, garish show jewellery had been replaced by smaller, more subtle gemstones.

"You didn't miss much Lady Toller. Bright Blessings for your birthday." Kore said graciously. "It was mine two weeks ago, we should have compromised and had a joint banquet in Dresk's Ale house." Kore noticed Lady Toller's hurt expression and usually such an expression would have annoyed her. "Forgive me, my manners are atrocious. Thank you for inviting me." She muttered.

"Actually I didn't, Spence did." Ursus sighed. She thought she saw a glimmer of conversation starting just then, but she told herself she was mistaken. Kore the gladiator girl had the same opinion of her as she had of the rest of the governmental bodies and associates.

"Pass on my thanks." Kore said shortly. "Where is he anyway?" Ursus nodded to the tangle of bodies at the far end of the room and Kore blinked a few times in surprise. "Umm OK." She buried her face in her goblet. Kore realised how naïve in upper class protocol she really was.

"No it isn't, it's obscene and humiliating." Ursus stated. "It has been for over fifteen years and I doubt it'll change now."

"So you just put up with it?" Kore said in disgust. "I'm sorry, it's none of my business."

"I could go over there and give him a sound telling off I suppose." Ursus shrugged.

"Point taken. You don't seem overly upset about it. I'd have pinned the lot of them to the wall with my sword by now." Kore moved to stand with her back to the scene.

"I'm used to it. Come to think of it, I never really was upset by it. Shocked and humiliated, but not upset because of it in particular. That probably doesn't make a lot of sense." Ursus smiled. It made a change for her to talk about her husband in this way. Her usual conversationalists were officials and official's wives, obviously not the type of people to speak ill of the governor to. Ursus was finding this to be a source of relief.

"Makes sense to me. You don't like him. I don't blame you." Kore said bluntly. Ursus automatically looked shocked, followed by extreme amusement. Kore was exactly right, Ursus didn't like her husband at all and couldn't really remember a time when she had. "The only reason it would upset you with regards to him being unfaithful was if you loved him enough to be upset, jealous even."

You aren't. Sod him. Go get yourself fixed up with one of the soldiers." Kore suggested and Ursus began to laugh. "Well why not?" Kore laughed too. "One of the gladiators in the Pit decided on a fling with a girl from the florists on Zenith Lane and his partner, and fellow gladiator, found out. Heck I think she went through the entire village in a week just for payback." Ursus laughed even more and it made her face hurt! She hadn't had much reason to laugh at all during her life with Spence.

"Do you have a partner?" She asked and Kore shook her head.

"We don't make good spouses." She smiled. "Hazardous job and hellish stressful on the family I'd imagine. No I have no partner."

"You're very beautiful, if you don't mind me saying." Ursus said truthfully. "I'd be very surprised at your single status if it wasn't for your occupation."

"Er .. thank you." Kore mumbled. Gladiators didn't get many compliments on anything outside their fighting skills and prowess in the arena. They certainly didn't get remarks made about their beauty. "Did Governor Toller invite me here out of respect for my arena skills, Lady Toller?" Ursus grimaced and looked very awkward indeed. "No, I realise that now." Kore glanced at the giggling group on the cushions. "I think he's going to be disappointed if he wants me among all that."

"I'll be honest with you Kore, I'm hoping he's forgotten about inviting you. I know that sounds rude but under the circumstances I'm sure you'd prefer that 'rudeness' as much as I'm hoping for it." Ursus looked at the divan in disgust. "I might be wrong here but I would have thought it would take more than Spence's perceived flattery to get someone as astute as you to accept an invitation of this nature."

"It would, yes, and it did." Kore was very impressed with Lady Toller's reasoning. "It's fine though, no harm done to anyone and it's not as mind numbingly boring as I expected it to be. Is he looking for you?" Spence Toller had emerged, glassy-eyed and grinning inanely all around the hall.

"Doubtful." Ursus looked very annoyed at her husband's emergence. "Excuse me please. I'll go and direct his attention to another orgy." She strode off in her husband's direction and Kore couldn't help but admire this deliberate action to keep Toller's unwanted advances away from her. She felt extremely annoyed with this reptile and his treatment of an obviously intelligent woman who had more dignity and self-pride in her fingernail than her husband had in his whole body. He was an ugly troll of a man too and the term 'reptile' was actually a compliment to him. Lady Toller, on the other hand, was a very attractive woman, her dignity adding to this appearance and enhancing it.

"You're wanted out in the lobby." Kore turned round to see the Captain that had been standing in the doorway. Kore sincerely hoped it was Captain Creed come to ensure she'd kept up her end of their forced agreement, then she could go and have a few pots of real ale at Dresk's before going home to bed. She followed the soldier into the deserted lobby and looked up and down it for Creed. "You don't know me do you?" Kore turned round to look at the soldier.

"Captain Pape wasn't it? I think that's what your General said. Is Captain Creed not here?" Kore asked.

"Not until midnight. It's just me and you brat." Pape smiled viciously and the hairs on Kore's neck stood on end.

"You're right, I don't know you. Come any closer and I'll ..."

“Run me through with the sword you don't have? You gladiators are all lost without your metalwork.” Pape grabbed Kore by her arms and Kore delivered a very ineffective kick to his shins. Damned useless slippers! Pape laughed and pinned her to the wall but soon stopped laughing when Kore's forehead connected with the bridge of his nose with a sickening crunch. He howled in pain and reeled backwards and Kore looked about for something, anything, to use as a weapon. The only one in sight, apart from the one on Pape's belt, was the one in Captain Vespus Creed's hand. He was running down the corridor and looked far from happy.

“Pape! What the hell is going on?” He demanded. “Stand up straight man!” Pape let go of his face and tried to stand to attention. Kore hitched up her dress and drove her knee full tilt into his groin before Creed could even open his mouth to speak. “Shit! Right you, over there!” He pushed Kore away from Pape, who was howling again. “It's the cells for you, you little bitch. Pape! Explain this, now!”

“Sh ... she attacked me.” Pape wheezed.

“Right, yeah.” Kore drawled. “I'm really going to attack a fully armed, fully armoured Azorian soldier in a governmental building while dressed in a bloody ball gown! Get real you prick.”

“Shut it!” Creed shouted. “Pape go and get yourself cleaned up. You can cool off in the jail house, and I'll look into this tomorrow.” He pointed at Kore.

“You can get away from my guest and I'll look into it now.” Lady Toller was standing fuming in the lobby. Creed backed away accordingly. “You OK Kore?” Both soldiers looked at each other in alarm at the unexpected familiarity between Lady Toller and the gladiator girl. “For your report, Captain Creed, Captain Pape approached my guest here, in the hall and I observed him speaking to her myself, as did four dancing girls and my husband. Kore followed the Captain out here and I strongly suspect it was because she was eager to see you, seeing as she's mentioned you a few times during the course of the evening. What you deduce from the scene we see here is down to your own very good common sense. Kore is unarmed and hardly dressed for fighting, quite the opposite, don't you agree Captain Pape?” Lady Toller barked. Kore had to look at the ground to hide a smirk at Lady Toller's official manner. She was very, very good at it. “Apart from Kore being invited here specifically by Governor Toller, as you know already Captain Creed, she is also a friend of mine. I'm strongly considering taking this matter further. Good evening gentlemen!” The soldiers nodded and withdrew down the lobby. “I don't like that man. Pape I mean. Creed is actually a very good soldier. Are you OK? Did he hurt you?”

“Pfft! Er ... I mean, no. Thank you Lady Toller, he didn't hurt me, just took me by surprise.” Kore only just remembered to unearth her manners. “He seemed to think I should know him, but I don't think I do. Attacked him my arse. Stupid cretin. Where are we going?” Ursus was leading Kore down the lobby, away from the hall.

“Out of that brothel before it gets any worse. My rooms are just along here, I'll pour you a drink to calm your shock, then you can leave if you want to. I wouldn't blame you.” Ursus sighed.

“Calm my shock? I'm a gl ... glad you offered Lady Toller, thank you.” Kore saw the real reason straight away. Lady Ursus Toller was a very lonely woman. Kore was probably the only one to speak normally with her in years. Kore found herself not totally adverse to the idea either, she'd been pleasantly surprised with her during the few short hours she'd been in Lady Toller's company.

“Ursus, please.” Lady Toller's rooms were a whole series of rooms and the first one was bigger than

the whole of Kore's stone house. "I'm sorry, I'm being forceful." She noticed the overwhelmed look on Kore's face. "I've forgotten how to ask for peoples' company, forgive me. I'll send for someone to see you out."

"Hey! I've not had my drink!" Kore grinned and sat on the huge couch, then sank into it so her feet lifted off the carpeted floor. Ursus looked delighted. "My treat next time, we'll go to Dresk's Ale House and I'll buy you a bucket of his finest horse-piss."

"You're laughing, but to tell you the truth, I'd love it. I've never been to an ale house but I've seen my father come out of plenty when he was alive." Ursus laughed.

"Well perhaps Dresk's is a tad severe for a first time outing. His idea of a bar meal is the cockroaches in your pot of ale. Ursus? You will be OK later won't you?" Kore was genuinely concerned.

"You mean Spence? Perfectly OK. He never comes in here, not interesting enough for him." Ursus refilled the goblets. "Hell I'm half drunk. I've usually left the land of the waking by now due to sheer boredom." She laughed. "I really do appreciate your company Kore. Shit who'd have thought my first adult friend would be a gladiator?" The women both laughed. "You know I form attachments very quickly, you'll have noticed that. It's lead to a lot of disappointments too."

"It's not a fault." Kore shrugged. "You want friends. That's not abnormal. The fact that your husband's a dick and he scares any potential friends away is the problem. You'll see a possibility and a hope for a friendship and you'll charge at it while you have the chance. Any imbecile could see that."

"How do you know?" Ursus said in amazement. "You're absolutely right, I get a bit desperate at times, then I feel silly. Is it that obvious?"

"It's common sense." Kore smiled. "'Common' being the key word there. I see real people all day, every day. The handful of people you see may as well be from the space beyond the heavens as far as reality goes. I know people, that's all and in my occupation we have to have people weighed up pretty quickly otherwise we're injured, or worse." She accepted yet another drink and wondered who was the most drunk, her or Ursus. "See here?" Out came the stitched up wound, an almost certain activity practised by all drunken fighters. Kore waited for the gasp and Ursus predictably obliged. "That because I didn't weigh up that my second was a moron." Kore laughed and told Ursus about Shawn's irresponsible placing of his sword on the cell bunk. Ursus was as horrified as Leo had been. "And here, this big old bruise was from this afternoon where the last one dug me in the ribs and this scab under my chin is where the Nellation nearly kicked my head off. Oh he's fine now by the way." Kore nodded seriously. "Jyp!" She yelped suddenly. The poor man was still outside sitting under a bush! She's completely forgotten about him! "I really must get going Ursus." Kore got unsteadily to her feet. "It's a fair walk back to the Pit."

"You're welcome to stay here if you like. As I said, Spence never comes in here and there's loads of room." Ursus offered.

"Any other time I'd accept your wonderful offer." Kore said truthfully. "I appreciate you asking but my colleagues won't know where I am tomorrow. Believe it or not, we do keep tabs on each other down there out of concern."

"I understand. I'll walk with you to the main doors myself. The guards won't stop and hinder you if you're with me." Ursus draped a shawl over her shoulders then found another one for Kore. Real

silk! “Mind you don't trip over the pedest ...” Ursus tripped over the pedestal of the washbasin instead and sprawled headlong into the door, then the lobby. Kore could hardly move for laughing and Ursus could hardly get to her feet for the same reason.

Jyp unfolded from his bush when he heard, rather than saw, Kore approaching. Ursus had left her at the doors and Kore was now weaving down the path singing a bawdy gladiator song that Blacklock had taught her when she was a child.

“Little Lady! Having good old piss-up eh?” Jyp laughed. “Good stuff indeed. Up goes you.” He hoisted Kore onto his shoulders and she sang even louder. By the time they reached the Pit, Jyp also knew the Gladiator's Ring song all the way through and was singing it as loudly as Kore was.

Chapter 8

Administrator Herod Bonetti sat at his desk in his well ventilated office and pursed his lips as he rested his chin on his fingertips.

“I'm not sure what you would have me do General Marx.” He's listened to the Military General with great interest.

“All I'm saying is that those animals in the Pit are gaining celebrated notoriety and it's wrong Sir.” Marx said stiffly. “They've managed to weasel themselves into governmental circles, and I dread to think where else. Not only that, but expect to be able to do exactly as they please with no repercussions.” He pointed to Captain Pape who was now sporting two very shiny black eyes and a split over his nose, as well as a noticeable limp. “He's a Military Captain, Sir! The whole army is being made a mockery of.”

“General, I can no more intervene in a scuffle between two citizens here than I could if they were brawling outside of Nap's Tavern. As I said, what would you have me do? Downgrade the arena and the Pit to state prison status again?” Bonetti felt rather irritated at this seemingly trivial issue that General Marx insisted quite persistently in bringing to his personal attention.

“It wasn't just a scuffle, Administrator Bonetti. Captain Pape was on duty and that particular gladiator is the current champion.” Marx said loudly and Bonetti rose his eyebrows. “Yes Sir, no ordinary gladiator. You know what those people are like, they make icons of their champions. If their champion is allowed to run amok in a governmental Villa, of all places, then they'll follow suit. I'm sure you remember the siege of the parliament building a few years ago?” This 'siege' had been Blacklock and three other gladiators and that was all. They'd found it necessary to approach the parliament building itself, and in person, when their reports of three dead and rotting bodies that were dumped in the water reservoir in the Pit, went unheard for four days. The 'siege' went on for another four days because the government labelled the personal request a siege and therefore were not obliged to meet 'demands'. The absurdity of this was that no one but the Military were allowed to touch dead bodies, with the exception of identified gladiator bodies, until a cause of death had been established. Blacklock would have been jailed had he attempted to remove the corpses from the water supply. Not many could try and manhandle Blacklock away from anywhere and come out unscathed and two cadets and one captain had received minor bruises during the course of this incident. “Eight good soldiers needed severe medical treatment as a result of that. This is the reason those type of people were prevented from obtaining any sort of dependant job, let alone one that involves influencing others. They're a mob Sir and they always will be.”

“Are you suggesting that I go and remove this gladiator champion from his position?” Bonetti laughed in amusement. “Apart from the revenue we'd lose, do you really want the gladiators disbanded? Surely that will release them into the society you're so very concerned about. There again, they're all trained fighters, perhaps the Military is a natural progression.”

“Not even vaguely similar Sir.” Marx said in disgust and decided not to correct the Administrator regarding the arena champion's gender. “They need controlled, as they were before. We didn't get Military officers being freely assaulted when that slum was contained. They should be weeded out of our society Sir, and thrown back in with their own kind, where they belong. Let's face it, it

wouldn't be difficult, they maintain ghetto status themselves for the Pit.”

“Marx, the number of ex-gladiators in our dependant employment bracket is so low that it simply wouldn't be worth the manpower. If they ever leave the Pit then the positions they take are in the service of established families or trades.” Bonetti yawned. “I really can't see why you saw it necessary to alert me to this. It's a skirmish. Your Captain isn't the first to be injured on duty and he certainly won't be the last.”

“We could make sure they understand that this sort of blatant thuggery won't be tolerated, Sir.” Marx said quickly. “Obviously seeking out all independently employed ex Pit-dwellers would be harsh and fanatical. If we make an example, Sir, then that rabble will know we're serious about this and this sort of unchecked violence will not be tolerated in the future.” Marx pointed at Pape again who nodded in agreement.

“Example?” Bonetti rose his eyebrows again.

“Yes Sir. The repercussions of apprehending the arena champion would be ... troublesome ... to us at this particular time. Apprehending a librarian, however, and making it known that such people are a dissident threat to Azoria if in these positions will re-awaken people's awareness to just how far through our society these rebels have seeped.” Marx glanced at Pape then back at Bonetti.

“The library on Blue Lane? The librarian is an ex-gladiator?” Bonetti said in surprise.

“He is Sir, and once a anarchist, always an anarchist. He should never have been offered such a position of employment. These people need to know that they cannot take advantage of our offers of equality and freedom and repay it by public displays of violence. The gladiator champion's outrageous behaviour towards my Captain has resulted directly in the dismissal of one of their kind from a civic job. The citizens of the Pit need to know this most clearly.” Marx said confidently.

“You do appreciate that I couldn't possibly make such a decision alone?” Bonetti said slowly. “If it backfires, we have a gladiator revolt. You do understand that I presume?”

“Sir, even with the entire population of the Pit out in force, the Military still outnumber, out-skills and is obviously far more organised and efficient than them. We have the means to control it Sir, and we have a reason to. This librarian needs apprehended as a warning.” Marx said.

“Your suggestion has been noted, General Marx.” Bonetti nodded. He hadn't realised the situation in the Pit was such a threat, in fact he hadn't realised there was a situation at all. That was no good, no good at all. A Governor had to be in touch with his citizens, something that the current one certainly wasn't and that was leading to a decline in his popularity. Bonetti didn't see himself as an opportunist but after ten years as an Administrator he honestly did believe he was due a promotion. The people of Azoria needed to see something positive and the removal of disruptive factions in their society couldn't be anything but good. “Dismissed.” He waved his hand at the soldiers.

Marx and Pape left the office and headed to their barracks.

“You handled that pretty well.” Pape said truthfully. “Thanks for being concerned about my injuries.”

“Huh? Oh get a grip Pape.” Marx snorted. “I've had bigger cuts on my arse off the wooden middens in here.” He loosened his buckled tunic and sat on Pape's bunk, his own bunk being in an adjoining room befitting a General. “We arrest that twin and the other one's bound to go crazy. She'll get herself arrested in no time at all then the both of them are out of here and headed for the gem mines

on Killian. I can't believe they survived all these years in the Pit! Damn you Cooper, you asshole.”

“Maybe a crazy twin can be handled but what if she gets the others there onside too? As you said, they're a mob.” Pape pointed out. “I realise it's a good opportunity to flush the shits out but is it the right way? Those twins are only two of them.”

“Two of them who we should have cut and buried ten years ago. How many ranks have you lost due to that crap? I know I lost far too many whilst pissing about on urban patrol for three years. To add insult to injury, who gets ranked at every stage before me? Ben bloody Astrella! The very shit-bag who smuggled them into Azoria to begin with.” Marx said angrily. “Are you stupid altogether Pape? You got it even worse than I did because you actually a blade to the little bastard.”

“I should have made General last year, at least.” Pape agreed.

“And Astrella shouldn't be in for Divisional General for the full Military.” This position had never been filled since Faust Cooper had retired and this was purely because no one had ever had the skills, experience and knowledge that Faust had. No one except who he chose to impart this knowledge to, at least, and that was a class of only one individual. Ben Astrella.

“There's still the risk of a revolt though.” Pape reminded the General. “Bonetti won't want that.”

“Bonetti won't mind in the slightest, Pape.” Marx explained. “He isn't the Governor and he's waiting in the wings to rectify Toller's catastrophes, as are we. We get the positions we deserve and so do the rest of the decent people here. Positions that are being filled by bloody gladiators who decide they want a cushy life they don't damned well deserve. The Azorian Military is obliged and bound to protect the people of Azoria and if a gladiator revolt doesn't constitute as need for protection then I'll be bugged if I know what does.” Marx exhaled loudly. “They'll be flattened, Pape, deemed criminals once more. A name that should never have been taken off them in the first place.”

“Why now?” Pape was rather surprised at his General's sudden passion regarding this. He was well aware of Marx's opinions and views about the gladiators, he shared those opinions completely but this sudden urgency was a bit overwhelming for the Captain.

“That bitch last night was the last straw for me.” Marx spat. “Floating around giving herself airs and graces, even to the extent of getting that gold-digging tart Ursus Toller on her side. They're in the governmental strata Pape, don't you see? Do you want Athulan bastards running Azoria?”

“Well, no.” Pape actually moved a few steps away from his General. He was starting to make him a bit edgy and Pape thought this a bit maniacal even for Marx. “Don't you think you're a bit ... stressed out? I don't think the name Athula would ever resurface again. Even if there were any kicking around they wouldn't use the name would they?”

“For shit's sake! You have missed the damned point!” Marx yelled. “Athulan, Athulan sympathiser, Anti-DeGaise, anti-Azorian! Yes? They caused a war the last time and they'll do it again with their underhanded greed.” Pape actually wondered which history books and which account of which war his General had been reading. “We need this started Pape, we need that librarian arrested and we need it done before the shit in our own ranks stops it. Cooper and Astrella showed their colours ten years ago. Cooper isn't an issue now, he's old and past his time. Astrella needs kept out of this, it doesn't concern him at all, how can it? He's Tibraen for a start.”

“Louis, as a friend of twelve years, I ask you to seriously think this through.” Pape said warily. “I'm not saying that this doesn't need to happen but I believe it'll happen in it's own time and by a

different method than an all out revolt caused by the arrest of a suspected dissident. If he'd tried to assassinate the Governor or attempted to blow up the Military building then it'd ..." Pape actually flinched when Marx jumped to his feet.

"Good point."

"Er ... thank you. Yes, I think so too." Pape nodded. "I'm not trivialising dissident behaviour but something less ambiguous would ..."

"Shush Pape, I'm thinking." Marx scowled at the floor and Pape shushed. "Something that won't make a martyr out of that twin." Marx mused. "Something that's not severe enough for his gladiator sister and her rebels to be completely revolted by, otherwise they'll disown him, but ... hmm ..."

"A 'serve you right' type thing?" Pape offered and Marx's face broke out into a wide grin.

"And when we're running the entire Azorian Military, and therefore Azoria, it'll serve the damned lot of them right. We have work to do Pape and our first stop is Toller's Villa."

Vespus Creed stood in Administrator Bonetti's office and felt slightly apprehensive as he watched the thin, wiry man scratch out writing on a parchment. The Captain could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Bonetti even in passing, let alone a direct summons. What was making him so wary was Creed didn't actually know which government area the Administrator was involved in. The man seemed to be among everything and anything going on. Creed had always got the impression that he was a bit of a fawning busybody but even so, he was a fawning busybody with a very powerful government position.

He knew damn fine that Bonetti was keeping him standing there on purpose and it was unnerving him, as it was designed to do.

"Blouser's iron-smiths in the Second Quarter." Bonetti said eventually, without looking up from his paperwork. "Are they still in business?"

"I believe so, Sir." Creed answered in bewilderment. "Obviously on a far smaller scale than they once were." Blouser's were the only 'industrial' smiths in Azoria. They manufactured structures, support pillars and anything else that was of a large scale but their main source of income used to be the building of war-machines. These consisted of anything the Military could utilise to flatten obstacles and oppositions. They made huge catapults and gigantic levered contraptions designed to prise open the stoutest fortress gates. They built wheel-mounted battering rams and hinged panelled armoured covers for troops and encampments. In the post-war days, Blouser's had almost gone out of business due to lack of trade but managed to scrape their survival by switching their goods to those of a more domestic nature and relied heavily on their reputation and noted name. "I hear that Hessod's is of a somewhat higher standard these days Sir, and of a closer proximity."

"Hinges, Creed." Bonetti looked at the Captain. "I need a price so I can offer figures to parliament. I have no solid plans as yet, but I do need a draught on paper to present." He flourished his hand over his papers on his desk in a very proud manner even though Creed had no chance of telling what they were from that distance. "Well?"

"Sir I'm not sure if this is my area of work." Creed tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. He was an Azorian Captain, not an errand boy.

"Oh?" Bonetti rose his eyebrows at Creed. "I could terminate your position in the Military to rectify that." Creed gritted his teeth and hoped the Administrator couldn't see him turning a bad tempered

shade of purple.

“Hinges, Sir. Any type and size in particular? Or do I get a quote of the entire stock?” He tried not to sound too sarcastic.

“Cubit length block hinges with reinforced rivets.” Bonetti said promptly. “I need the cost of one, then I need a discount for the cost of six.”

“Six block hinges?” Creed said in surprise. These were massive items and it usually took four men just to place one where it needed to be. These hinges had been used in the construction of the Quarter Bridges that joined Azoria with Plaus. “With respect Sir, are you sure those are what you need?”

“You're questioning my knowledge of one of my very own projects? Six cubit length block hinges, plus rivets and possibly manpower. Your job is to do that, not question it.” Bonetti said coldly. Creed nodded his understanding and withdrew from the Administrator's office. What in hell did he want those for? Apart from anything else, they'd cost a fortune.

“Pape!” Creed spotted the junior Captain running along the path outside the Administrative building. “Pape, you're to accompany me to the Second Quarter this afterno ...”

“I don't think I can.” Pape stopped to look at Creed. “I'm on my way to make an arrest, General Marx's orders.”

“Shit.” Creed cursed. “Can't he go and make his own arrest?”

“Oh he is, but he thinks he might need backup.” Pape puffed out his chest and Creed rolled his eyes.

“Anything major that I should know about? How much backup and how big is the riot?” He knew as well as everyone else that skirmishes were often blown way out of proportion at times depending on the level of boredom of the division on patrol.

“No riot yet. I'd better get going.” Pape nodded and continued to hurry down the path.

“Bah! Well I'll be buggered if I'm setting off at this time of day. Tomorrow will do.” Creed mumbled to himself. Bonetti hadn't specified a deadline for this project draught so Creed intended to take full advantage of that omission. “Block hinges for shit's sake. Washed-out little weed probably doesn't know what the hell he's doing.” He strode towards the barracks to throw a few orders around to a few cadets, just to relieve a bit of stress.

Kore was doing her best not to wail pathetically as Blacklock ran at her with a short-sword.

He'd decided that his star pupil and himself should take advantage of the arena while it was closed to the public, by hauling Kore and her hangover out of her bed and insisting on a training session.

“Dead. Again.” Blacklock said flatly, holding his sword against Kore's neck. “You're a slob.”

“I am.” Kore snivelled and tried to stand in Blacklock's shadow so the sunlight wouldn't make her eyeballs explode. “Wine must have been off.”

“Oo! Wine eh? Too good for the arena now, My Lady?” Blacklock swept Kore's legs from her with his foot and she howled for at least thirty seconds. “Oh get up you frilly dancing-girl. You wouldn't

know a good ale-fest if it half drown you.” He laughed at Kore feeling sorry for herself.

“Wine.” Kore corrected and accepted Blacklock's hand offered to help her up off the dusty ground. She suddenly grabbed the other hand, planted her feet on her trainer's stomach and somersaulted him over herself and onto his back. “Oh for pity's sake that's enough of that shite.” She drew up her knees and held her throbbing head in her hands. Jyp came lumbering out of the tunnel and towards them to advise Blacklock that curtailing the session would be a good thing seeing as the Little Lady had a 'head like a shed of shit'. Kore agreed with him, gave him the sad, forlorn look, wedged herself under his huge arm, then smirked at Blacklock.

“Oh get out of my bloody way!” Shawn's voice bellowed from the tunnel. “Training permit? I'm twice arena champion and her bloody second! Get out of the way or I'll knock every tooth out of your head!” He roared at the sweeper on duty. “Kore!” He came running into the arena and was out of breath, which was very unusual for someone as physically fit as Shawn was. “Shit and damnation. Will you tell him to piss off, Blacklock? I'm about two seconds from running him through!” The sweeper was stupid enough to follow Shawn into the arena.

“It's OK he's part of this team.” Blacklock said to the man and he nodded and turned to leave.

“Is that it? Well bugger me daft, I've been yelling that at him for ten sodding minutes!” Shawn snarled.

“Shawn!” Kore shrieked, then winced. “What in hell is wrong? Look at you! Can we stop bellowing please?” She added feebly.

“Kore it's Leo.” Shawn panted and Kore started and grabbed her sword automatically.

“I'm going.”

“Kore wait!” Shawn caught her arm. “They've arrested him.”

“They've what?” Kore growled ominously. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am! I'd hardly come and tell a maniac like you if I wasn't sure!” Shawn was close to maniacal himself. “Matthias the grocer was in the library talking to Leo when they barged in. He came straight to the Pit looking for you Kore, he just walked right through the place.” This actually took a lot more bravery than it seemed. People avoided the Pit like the plague and never walked right into the place alone, no matter what time of day it was.

“The snake-livered, bilious, septic streak of horse-piss!” Kore erupted. “The sneaky, underhanded whoreson!” She barged towards the tunnel. Jyp looked extremely confused but followed her none the less.

“Kore! Where the hell are you going?” Shawn shouted after her. “You can't storm the bloody jail-house! You haven't even asked why he's been lifted! Blacklock! Tell her!”

“I'm not going to the jail-house.” Kore yelled over her shoulder. “I know exactly who to go and see!” Shawn looked desperately at Blacklock who was trying not to look as extremely shocked as he actually was.

“She has Jyp.” He said eventually. “Whatever's going on we're of more use out here than we are locked up in a jail-cell with her. Well? What in black buggery could a brainy librarian do to get damned well arrested?”

"I don't know." Shawn exhaled loudly. "Matthias said they arrested him 'regarding an issue of a delicate nature.' What in shit's name does that mean?"

Something they didn't want the rest of the library to hear." Blacklock reasoned. "That rules dissident charges out. They catch one of those and they announce it all over Azoria as an example."

"Come on, we'll go to the jail-house." Shawn said.

"No we won't." Blacklock sheathed his weapon. "I know from experience how many gladiators those arseholes class as a revolt, especially if I'm one of them. Like I said, we're more use to Kore if she gets her bad tempered self arrested too, if we're not locked up for rioting. We go home where people know where to find us."

"What? So we just sit about while Leo's in jail and Kore's on the rampage somewhere?" Shawn said in disbelief.

"Basically, yes. We don't even know what the hell's going on Shawn and charging around the city trying to find out doesn't work for gladiators. Dresk's is a notorious gossip shop, especially when two of our own are concerned, namely Kore and Leo. Jyp too I suppose." Blacklock shrugged. "Who you worried about? Leo or Kore?" He smiled at the fighter as they entered the tunnel.

"Both of them!" Shawn exclaimed, scowling at the ground. "Blast and damn it! I knew she'd dart off marauding all over the city like this. I had no choice though, I had to come straight here to tell her before she found out by gossip. Why does she have to be so lunatic at times?"

"Gladiator? Yes?" Blacklock shook his head. "She's always been the same, even when she was a kid. Leo would sit for ages thinking about it and in the mean time, Kore would have it ran at, subdued and resolved. I gave her her first short-sword when she was twelve, she had her first match-up when she was thirteen and won her first public fight a week after her fourteenth birthday. It was meant to be Leo's fight and she said it was her birthday gift for him. Arena champion at fourteen Shawn, it was amazing."

"You think more of Leo and Kore than you show." Shawn observed.

"I suppose I do, yes." Blacklock smiled. "You, on the other hand, moon after Kore as blatantly as Leo fusses after her." He laughed.

"I know. Pathetic aren't I?" Shawn laughed too. "I don't know why either, not after all this time. I know me and Kore will always be close friends and I've got used to that, believe it or not. I think the mooning is automatic."

"Possibly. Possibly, and probably because everyone expects you doing it too, Kore included. If you stopped the open flirting all of a sudden then the alarm bells would go off. You do right to keep it all as it is, at least you have each other's trust and friendship." Blacklock sidestepped an Azorian soldier who was shifting a stone slab away from the middle of the Pit's gateway. "About bloody time someone moved that."

"You're pretty good with people Blacklock. It's obvious where Kore gets it from." Shawn commented.

"I'm in the same boat as you are with her." Blacklock shrugged and Shawn almost fell over in surprise. "No! Not quite the same." Blacklock bellowed a laugh. "How easy would it be for me to

see Leo and Kore as my own? You with me now? Had I done that, neither of them would have survived here.” He looked round the Pit’s muddy street. “Do it now, and I change the whole relationship I have with them, especially Kore who’s still here in the village. I like the relationship as it is.”

“You do know that they’re referred to as Blacklocks occasionally?” Shawn said. “Not all the time, usually for clarification.”

“I know, yes.” Blacklock smiled. “I’ve known both Kore and Leo adopt the name themselves when the situation warranted. For all I know, they might not even know their names after this length of time.” He shrugged. “Even though they get my name at times everyone still knows they aren’t mine. What type of parent would train his own kids for the arena?”

“Back to the maintained relationship again. I often wish that Kore would find a man you know. Not me, I know that’s completely unworkable. I can dart off to the brothel or even just troll around Dresk’s. She can’t do that, nor would she if she could. Weird how dignity levels are different even in this place.” Shawn kicked a few stones out of their path to the ale-house. “Oh well, gladiators just aren’t spouse material I suppose.” Blacklock nodded and opened the door to Dresk’s bar. His spouse didn’t get chance to be, she’d died of lung disease not long after the War started, leaving Blacklock with two young children. Minnie was the first to go, six months after her mother and from a similar cause. Torran lasted another eight months before he too, went to play with his sister in the gardens of the gods. Blacklock had been rounded up and brought from the scrub-land of Plaus to the Pit a mere two days after burying his son. Minnie would have been twenty years old now, Torran twenty two.

“Blacklock?” Dresk was standing behind the counter with an ale jug in his hand.

“Yes, please. In fact, hand over the jug.”

Chapter 9

Vespus Creed didn't know what had hit him when he felt a blade under his throat as he lay on his bunk. Someone had managed to enter a guarded barracks building, into the sleeping quarters and was now standing behind his bunk with a sword to his throat! He glanced at his own weapon at the foot of his bed on his wooden chest before grimacing to himself and slowly outstretching his arms in submission.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn't slit your throat and let the rest of the arseholes believe it to be the work of your treacherous shit-bags here in the Military?” Kore said savagely.

“You'd never get out of this room in one piece for a start.” Creed tried to control his thudding heartbeat. The gladiator girl?

“Wrong answer.” Kore pressed her blade closer into the Captain's flesh.

“Wait!” Creed gasped. “You said once before that you appreciated my honesty, give me the chance for that appreciation again.” He closed his eyes and waited for the sting of metal slicing into his throat. The soldier almost sobbed in relief when he felt the pressure of the sword easing off his flesh slightly. “My reason for you not slicing my throat is that I wouldn't know why you were doing so and I think I deserve at least that.” Creed waited for the pressure to be re-applied.

“Horse-shit!” Kore rasped. “My brother?”

“Is no longer under investigation.” Creed answered promptly.

“Decided that rather swiftly didn't you? Judge, jury, executioner? You bastard!” Kore pulled Creed's head back by the hair.

“Wait!” Creed yelped in terror. “He's not under investigation and he never was! There isn't one single written document anywhere to say that any research was done on your brother, I swear it.”

“You lie! I kept up my end Creed and you saw me at that banquet to prove it!” Kore snarled.

“I know you did! Shit, you beat up a Captain just to prove it too! I know you kept up your end and so did I! Your brother is not under investigation!” Creed said in sheer panic. She was insane, armed, and he was going to die.

“So why is he sitting in your jail-house right at this very minute?” Kore managed to draw blood with the tip of her sword.

“What?!” Creed actually tried to turn round in sheer astonishment, cutting himself deeper. Kore noticed. Kore noticed every reaction to everything by everybody. “Kore I have no idea what you're talking about! The first and last time I saw your brother was at his home in Blue Lane. Shit I can't even remember his bloody name now!” Creed was completely taken aback at this news, so much so that he forgot he was at sword-point, unarmed, and lying down. “No bugger tells me anything in

this shit-hole!” He wafted his arms around and sighed heavily. “Why was he arrested?” Creed raised his eyes and realised that the sword was away from his exposed neck. “Thank you.”

“How in shit's name should I know?” Kore snapped. “I don't trust you Creed.” She kept the blade levelled at the soldier while she edged round the bunk to retrieve his weapon. “Even though you're a blundering oaf. I sleep with my sword.”

“You do? Look, never mind that! I had no part whatsoever in your brother's apprehension. If I had, I'd be down at the jail right now with my prisoner, not oafing around in the barracks! The only way I could be part of an arrest is if I had authorisation, I'm a Captain, not a General, and if you look on that paper on that chest you'll see that my immediate General is currently in Quarter One supervising security measures for a forthcoming Ambassadorial visit. Go on, check it. There's no one to give me such an order except a governmental Administrator. As you can see, I did see one of those earlier but you can also see the crappy orders he gave me. Nothing to do with arrests, in fact I'm not even detailed to be here.”

“Block hinges?” Kore said in surprise.

“Yes I know. I think he's got that wrong, fool.” Creed muttered. “Now do you believe me?”

“Not in the slightest.” Kore replied. “So who did arrest him and who authorised it and why in black hell did they arrest him? If any of those answers even hints at the word 'dissident' then I promise you, I will end you.” Creed didn't doubt it for one second.

“I have no idea why he was arrested, I knew nothing of it until now. As for your other questions, well I don't know that either and I refuse to indulge in speculation and premature conclusions, as you just did.” Creed wiped the blood from his neck. “Finding out who actually carried out the arrest would not be productive anyway.”

“You think not?” Kore fumed and raised her sword an inch more.

“I know not, and for that very reason.” Creed nodded at the sword. “You butchering official Military soldiers isn't going to exactly help is it? The only thing that will achieve is both twins sitting in the jail-house.” He said patiently. His calm words and manner belied his feelings completely. His stomach was a knot of emotions and none of them were pleasant. Creed felt shock at the arrest of such a placid and model citizen and immediately saw it as some sort of strategy move involving his not so placid twin, he'd used the exact same reasoning, himself. On this scale, however, it made his blood boil. This couldn't possibly be an official, parliament endorsed, action, otherwise the whole Military would have been notified. Creed felt panic and fright for obvious reasons, he's just narrowly escaped being sliced to death. Creed felt insulted too, his honour had been brought into doubt. If Creed gave his word then he stuck with it, but Kore the gladiator had been given reason to think he'd broken his promise. Creed felt unbelievably angry that something was going on here and that weasel Pape was among it, alongside his second skin, Marx. It had never ceased to amaze Creed how Marx ever got as far as Captain, let alone General. The man was as crooked as a dog's leg and sickeningly bigoted, attributes he shared with his pet kiss-arse, Pape, who he'd raised to the rank of Captain himself because no one else would.

“You're useless. I knew I should have approached the jail first.” Kore backed towards the door, still watching Creed.

“You'd be a fool if you did that.” Creed shrugged casually. “The arena champion's twin brother in the cells? Don't you think the guards might consider your appearance as possible? They'll be on the lookout for you, probably other gladiators too and the guard will almost certainly be doubled.”

“They arrested my brother to bait me?!” Kore exploded.

“I used a similar tactic myself.” Creed said. “Who would you rather take on? A trained fighter with the support of other fighters or a solitary bookworm? You already know my reasons for doing that, it's a past issue. The reasons for this latest shit is as much a mystery to me as it is to you. Believe me or don't, I can't help how you think.”

“They're trying to provoke me ...”

“Succeeded in provoking you.”

“Trying to provoke me into causing a scene, alone if necessary, with the other gladiators would be better. Why would you idiots want a hoard of pissed off gladiators on your doorsteps?” Kore said.

“To prove what a load of riff-raff you all really are and to show the citizens of Azoria that you're all violent criminals and don't deserve to be at large. That's theoretical, by the way, not a personal opinion.” Creed eyed Kore's sword warily.

“Well that's just tough luck. They won't get the scene they're after and I won't be the cause for their bloodshed. Arseholes.” Kore spat.

“So your brother just stays where he is? I suppose you could give him a wave when you pass the jail-house on your way to the arena.” Creed looked at Kore. “He's been arrested remember? Charged with a criminal offence? Whether you believe it to be fabricated or not doesn't matter Kore because it isn't your opinion that counts in a Courtroom. Depending on what he's done ... been charged with ... you needn't expect him to be released just because you refuse to play whatever game it is they're playing.”

“I need to ... to ...” Kore frowned in thought.”

“Go and kill someone?”

“Are you trying to aggravate me on purpose?” Kore snapped. “Believe me, that wouldn't be difficult, or wise.”

“My apologies.” Creed said graciously. “I meant your mood is understandably a tad stressful right now and an automatic reaction, especially for someone in your profession, is to retaliate in the only way you know how. That wasn't meant as an insult, it was an educated observation. You need to find out the charges that have brought against your brother, then those charges need to be undermined, if possible.” He mused, looking at the floor, deep in thought. Whatever Marx and Pape were up to couldn't possibly bode well. The very fact that they appeared to be risking a gladiator revolt demonstrated the violent rashness they preferred to use to address a situation. It certainly seemed that Marx, Pape, or maybe both, had some sort of particular dislike to these twins. Maybe because Kore was the arena champion and therefore 'the chief' of the gladiators? That didn't really fit seeing as everyone knew that the trainer, Blacklock, had all but ran the place for years. Creed could quite well believe that a pair of arrogant bigots like Marx and Pape would let a personal grudge heavily influence a full scale Military manoeuvre. This could quite well be the start of a reinstatement of the old Loram DeGaise days. “Don't blow your top here Kore, but are you one hundred percent, completely and utterly certain that your brother is above the propagation of dissident literature?”

“I warned you ...”

“Oh for buggery's sake girl! Think, will you? That is the only serious crime that I can think of that a librarian would be actually capable of. He'd have neither the means nor the opportunity to perpetrate anything else. If we can satisfy ourselves totally that it's impossible for him to be arrested for that, then any other charge is more than likely untrue.” Creed explained patiently.

“That is the most bizarre thought process I've ever heard.” Kore laughed and Creed felt vastly relieved that she had.

“Do you think so?” Creed asked. “It must be the major difference between gladiators and soldiers. The way we think.”

“That's true, hence my wondering who this 'we' is you're referring to, and why you're sitting here plotting ways to discredit your own Military. Wouldn't that be classed as treason?” Kore asked suspiciously.

“My Military is the one sworn to protect Azoria from tyranny and dictatorship.” Creed answered flatly. “Rash and prejudiced arrests like this one are guaranteed to cause unrest and quite probably a bloody riot. It's not my Military I'm concerned about, it's who's going to conveniently step in to quash this riot at the expense of a section of our population, the gladiators. Like you lot or not, you're still a recognised part of our society.”

“And do you 'like us lot?” Kore asked with an amused smile.

“I respect all sections of our people, from whatever walk of life and I certainly don't hound this generation as a continuation of a past generation.” Creed deflected.

“So you're just going to go to ... whoever ... and report this abuse of Military status, error of judgement or whatever you want to call it?” Kore didn't believe that for one minute.

“I don't know that there's been any of that, and the government will want more than my intuition to investigate a divisional General's conduct. To be honest with you, I wouldn't know which bloody government official to go to.” Creed sighed.

“Don't trust any of the shit-heads eh? That's what I like to see, dissent in the ranks.” Kore grinned. Lady Toller had been right, Captain Creed was a good soldier.

“I didn't say that.” Creed said vaguely. “I don't expect you to co-operate with me, or work with me, or help me in any way here but I do need to poke around discretely. If Azoria's at risk of a revolt and I can stop it then that's quite a jump up the career ladder for me.”

“Typical.” Kore sneered.

“Absolutely.” Creed agreed. “As a side-effect of it, it'll get your twin out of the jail-house, if he's innocent.”

“Which he is, no matter what they've made up about him. Leo is no dissident, Captain Creed. He's a librarian and a scholar and the only thing that disrupts his placid life is me. He's a fussy spot.” Kore grimaced and Creed smiled. “Are you suggesting another 'agreement'? If you are, pardon my reluctance and lack of enthusiasm.”

“No agreements, you wouldn't listen anyway. What I do suggest is that you keep a low profile. Do

not give anyone the opportunity to take advantage of your ... spirited ... nature. I can't force you to do that but you'll come the worst off if you don't. I intend to hover about and make inquiries into Leo's arrest, something which I can do quite naturally, you can't." Creed shrugged. "Like I said, I don't expect any co-operation, nor do I need it. To be fair to you, however, I give you my word that I'll relay anything regarding the apprehension to you. In my opinion, you and your brother are being used as pawns in a shameful manner, and an illegal manner."

"I believe you." Kore nodded. "All I want is my brother out of that midden of a jail, the politics and any ensuing glory is all yours, Captain. Your ways of helping do that are more ... acceptable than mine."

"More legal than yours." Creed corrected. "I don't think me wandering into the Pit later on to give you an update would be a wise move." Kore shook her head and smirked. "Nor would you turning up here among a building full of men."

"Offending my fluffy little ears?" Kore laughed. "The Pit is a village full of men, of both genders."

"Trust me Kore, it won't be your ears they'll be focusing on." Creed informed her and she shut up straight away. "I'll be in Quarter Two tomorrow sorting out Bonetti's blasted hinges." He said in irritation. "Then I'm on duty at the Ambassadorial Villa, overseeing the repair of the south wall. What with hinges and sodding masonry I may as well retire and go into construction." He grumbled, making Kore laugh. He really was a very nice man and was proving to Kore that not all Government retained officials were arseholes, just as Ursus had proved that not all Governmental 'contacts' were egocentric pricks. "I'm not sure when my divisional General is back. I'm contemplating whether or not to confide in him regarding all this. It's probably going to get far to official for someone of my rank. I might can dig out the basics but the rest is only my own speculation."

"Well I wouldn't trust any of them." Kore said bluntly.

"You aren't doing such a bad job with me." Creed smiled.

"I'll hack your balls off if you try any funny shit, that's why." Kore said with a grin. "OK so I'll be hovering about in the library morning after tomorrow. That won't seem unusual seeing as my brother's been kidnapped by arseholes. I'll be suitably woeful but I won't cause a fight. Will that do you?"

"That'll do me very well." Creed said. "It won't be unusual for me to have to take a look round the workplace of a charged person either. You're the only Kore I've ever met but I know of at least six Leo's in this Quarter and four of them often appear in that jail-house for some misdemeanour or another. What's his full name?"

"He'll use Blacklock." Kore answered. "We don't know any others."

"Sir!" Cadet Rowan shrieked from the doorway. "Sir there's a ... oops!" He spotted Kore sitting on the headboard of Creed's bunk. "Are you busy?"

"Just finished." Creed winked at Kore.

"Oh. Umm ... OK." Rowan went red and scratched his ear.

"Well? Oh you just want to gape at my guest do you? Carry on." Creed wafted his hand at Rowan.

“Yes. I mean no! I'll carry on.” The flustered Cadet babbled. “Sir! Sir there's an eight foot ogre outside with a bloody broad-sword!”

“A ... a ... who?” Creed said in alarm. “Outside where? Here? Shit.”

“That'll be Jyp.” Kore hopped off the bunk. “He's my friend. I keep trying to get him to keep his sword sheathed when he's wandering about. He says it scares people away from me.”

“As though he needs a frigging sword! He's massive!” Rowan blurted.

“He's Nellatian, of course he's massive.” Kore said defensively. “You didn't upset him did you?”

“Do what? I doubt the whole Azorian Military could upset him!” Rowan exclaimed.

“I heard about the Nellatian.” Creed said. “Didn't you buy him from Ambassador Knoss then give him his papers two seconds later?” He laughed and Kore nodded. “So why is he still obviously devoted to you and your well-being?”

“Because of that very reason Captain.” Kore answered. “It's called gratitude and friendship. I don't need to own friends, I earn them.” She nodded her farewells and left the barracks.

“Remarkable woman.” Creed said in admiration. “I feel such a bastard for manipulating her over that birthday farce.”

“Weird clothes for a tart Sir.” Rowan commented and Creed rolled his eyes.

“Not all women are tarts Rowan. Don't be so sexist.”

“I'm not Sir, of course all women aren't tarts but the ones who come here are. Why else would a woman come to a soldier's barracks?” Rowan reasoned.

“Point taken.” Creed conceded. He definitely wasn't going to tell a cadet that the reason for this one being here was to cut his throat, and almost succeeding. “Urban patrol?” He asked as Rowan pulled off his boots and prodded a very raw looking blister on his heel.

“And some.” Rowan grumbled. “Actually I'd like to make a point, officially, you know, so I'll do it now, to you.”

“Please do.” Creed said heavily.

“Urban patrol is pretty gruelling and dull as it is Sir, everyone knows that. I think after a shift of that, then that should be it, you know, finished for the day.” Rowan complained.

“And is it not that way? It always was, because of the reasons you mentioned.” Creed felt his temper bubbling again. Was this something else no one had told him about?

“Usually, Sir, yes it is. I was on my way back here hours ago Sir but Captain Pape ordered me to go with him as back-up. Is that allowed Sir? It wasn't on my rota or anything and Captain Pape isn't a General.” Rowan deduced.

“You went to the library?” Creed sat forward. “To arrest the librarian there?”

“Yes Sir. I'm not sure why Captain Pape thought he might need back-up. There was only one other person there and the librarian came along as quiet as a lamb Sir. So will I get paid a bonus for that? I very much doubt it. It's not right Sir.”

“Outrageous, I agree. I'll look into it Rowan, don't worry.” Creed assured the cadet. “Did Captain Pape make the arrest? For my inquiries, you understand.”

“No Sir, General Marx did but General Marx didn't order me to be there, that's my point. It was Captain Pape.” Rowan clarified his own issue.

“Yes I see your point. I'll look into it. Rowan, what were the charges? I have to be sure I get the correct event.” Creed admitted.

“It must be something serious Sir, I wasn't told.” Rowan said nodding his head.

“The charges will have been read out to the librarian at the time of his arrest.”

“They were Sir.”

“And?” Creed resisted the urge to get up and shake the cadet.

“Matters of a delicate nature.” Rowan said meaningfully.

“Eh?” Creed said in utter disbelief. “Well what the hell does that mean?” He knew what it didn't mean, however. It didn't mean dissident activity. Had Leo been arrested for that, it would have been proclaimed very loudly and to as many people as possible.

“I think it's a code Sir, among the ranked officers.” Rowan said seriously. “I hear they have signs and signals too that only other ranked officers can understand.”

“Are you serious?” Creed said in amazement. “You are, aren't you. Look Rowan, would I be asking you what it meant if it was some sort of official code that ranked officers were privy to? Keep in mind that I'm a Captain.” He said patiently.

“Oh. Yes I see.” the cadet looked rather disappointed. “I thought they just didn't want me to know. I don't think Captain Pape likes me. Feeling's mutual.” Rowan muttered and Creed tried not to laugh. Maybe he wasn't going to be totally alone in getting to the bottom of Pape and Marx's activities after all.

“Unless ... no, that would be ridiculous.” Creed said, glancing at Rowan. “Umm I wonder ... no they wouldn't do such a thing.”

“I was there all the time Sir so I can tell you if they did or they didn't and don't think I won't!” Rowan said proudly.

“This code.” Creed said, pursing his lips. “I wonder why they haven't told me about it.”

“Well Sir, if your face doesn't fit ... if you pardon me saying. You're a decent soldier Sir. Any skulduggery and you'd report it as quick as they liked and no messing.” Rowan sat on Creed's bunk next to Creed and Creed looked at him in surprise.

“Absolutely. So You think there's skulduggery afoot, Rowan?”

“Can't say Sir, but something isn't right when they haul a fellow in after a hard shift on patrol then go all ciphers on him now is it?”

“Definitely not right. Come on, we need to see those arrest forms to see what their silly codes mean, if anything. I might also have a small task for you to do tomorrow, as an extra but private and confidential duty.” Creed said, straight-faced. Rowan nodded eagerly. “I have to leave town for a few hours but I'd like the lady who was here earlier kept an eye on. I don't want her approached, harassed, provoked or otherwise aggravated in any way.” While Creed semi-trusted Kore, he didn't trust her temper at all.

“Is she in danger Sir? I'll see no harm comes to the young lady, don't worry.” Rowan said smartly. “Er ... Sir? I get the impression I've made a gaff here. She isn't a tart is she.” He stated more than asked and Creed shook his head. He did wonder if the cadet would recognise Kore at all. “In that case I'm sorry Sir, so very sorry. I'd never, ever say such a thing about someone's young lady, let alone a senior officer's young lady.”

“Huh? Oh! No Rowan, you misunderstand.” Creed laughed.

“It's OK Sir. I'm the sole of discretion.” Rowan assured the Captain.

“Rowan, that wasn't what it looked like back there.” Creed tried to explain. “She had me pinned to the bunk half an hour earlier. Shit, no, I mean ...”

“I said it's OK Sir.” Rowan repeated and Creed sighed heavily. “Having that Nellatian watch the door was a good move Sir. The only reason I got past him is because he was busy sharpening that sword of his on a boulder.”

“Yes, OK Rowan. The barracks aren't really the place for a young woman so we'll say no more of it.” Creed coughed and opened the doors to the jail-house. Captain Janus Hax was asleep in a chair behind a table with his feet on it. “Security is phenomenal.” Creed muttered.

“Creed.” Louis Marx appeared through an iron door that lead to the cells. “I thought you were in the Second Quarter.”

“Not until tomorrow Sir.” Creed cursed under his breath. He's expected Marx to have gone back to barracks. “I offered to help cadet Rowan with his reports, he seems to be short of a few details of this afternoon's arrest.”

“Oh? Details?” Marx looked at Rowan.

“Namely, the reason for it.” Creed said flatly. “As you know Sir, the cadets are graded on their reports and their future ranks depends on those grades. 'Matter of a delicate nature' means that cadet Rowan cannot give his interpretation of the charges, nor state which law was broken.” Even Creed thought that was damned good. “He'd be at a disadvantage among the other cadets who have participated in routine apprehensions. Perhaps you could clarify the exact charge, for his benefit, Sir?”

“I can do better than that.” Marx smiled and Creed felt like slapping him. He pushed Hax's boots off the table and retrieved a paper and pencil. “This should suffice, cadet Rowan. A full commendation for your part in this particular arrest, which was above the routine exercises your peers participate in. I've stated that your assistance was invaluable and above your call of duty, that you should carry out your orders without questioning what was obviously a more classified matter than the usual

arrests involving cadets. Your tact and respect for confidential matters are a credit to you, cadet Rowan. Well done." Marx handed Rowan the paper which would be graded at least two standards higher than the top grade obtainable by the conventional system. Rowan looked delighted and Creed just fumed. "Was that all, Captain Creed?"

"Yes Sir." Creed tried not to growl. "Come on Rowan, let's go and file your commendation. Well Done."

Chapter 10

Blacklock and Shawn almost collapsed in relief when they saw Jyp sitting on the library steps. It was well past nightfall and they'd had no choice to but venture out into the town to look for Kore. They'd managed to do so without attracting attention to themselves too, which was a feat in itself for two gladiators.

“Jyp the library should be closed.” Shawn nodded at the open wooden doors. “What's she doing in there? And couldn't she have damned well let us know?”

“Shoon hushing up nasty voice.” Jyp stood up and towered over the gladiator. “Not to be swearing at this time, Little Lady is very sad.” He warned.

“Yes.” Shawn sighed and nodded. “I'm sorry. Of course she's sad. Who is she with, Jyp?”

“No one. Jyp removed all others so not to see Little Lady crying. Her is sleeping on floor now.”

“Hell. Poor Kore.” Shawn looked at Blacklock.

“It's easy to forget that she cries like the rest of us.” Blacklock said. “May we go in Jyp? I promise you we'll be very quiet. We might get the Military over wondering what we're doing if we stay out here in the street.”

“Jyp coming in also.” The Nellatian closed the door once they were all inside the library then lifted a solid oak bookshelf against it that would have taken four regular men to lift. “Leo still having door keys, Jyp makes own lock. Not waking please.” The three men stood and looked at Kore who was in a fitful sleep under Leo's desk. Her eyelids were red and swollen and her cheeks were still damp with tears.

“Leo will be fine, surely she must know this?” Shawn was rather surprised and the level of distress this had caused Kore. Obviously she was upset about her brother's arrest, and worried, but it just wasn't like Kore to make herself as ill as she looked lying there right now.

“It's the separation, Shawn.” Blacklock told him. “Right at this moment it would be impossible for her to go to Leo if she needed or wanted to, that's probably never, ever happened before in their whole lives. She's lost.” He crouched down and covered Kore with his cape. “He'll be in a similar state in the jail-house. It's a good job you're here Jyp, you've done a wonderful job in looking after her.” Kore probably wouldn't have tolerated any other company at all when she was in such an uncharacteristic mood of despair. Jyp was different. He never asked questions of her because he saw no need. She was sad, she cried. It simply would never occur to the big Nellatian to try and assure Kore that there was no need for tears, nor would he ever suggest doing anything other than she was doing already, like going home, for example. Jyp just stayed with his Little Lady and made sure she was safe from physical harm, no matter what she was doing, and he'd stay there for the rest of his life if necessary.

“Jyp knows. Jyp also very ... pfft ... with fancy-man. Him sack of shite for not being with Little Lady right now.” Jyp tutted and planted himself on the floor in front of Kore.

“Fancy-man?” Blacklock looked at Shawn who was blinking at Jyp in surprise. “I think you have the wrong phrase Jyp. What fancy-man? Who?”

“Not knows.” Jyp shrugged. “Him need tipped anyhoo.”

“Dumped.” Shawn corrected. “Jyp are you saying Kore has a man? As in a ... partner?”

“Useless man. Little Lady went to party in big house to see him, all pretty too. Him not even seeing her home.” Jyp frowned at the floor as he thought. “Maybe him not can though, him is soldier.” Shawn let out a incredulous gurgle and Blacklock dropped his gloves.

“Jyp are you sure?” Blacklock didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or walk out. “Think very hard, my friend. Kore is seeing an Azorian soldier? Blue and grey uniforms?”

“Oh yes.” Jyp nodded seriously. “Little Lady go see him in soldier house today also. Her being pissed off about Leo though, so Jyp thinking them fought.”

“The ... the barracks?” Shawn stammered. “Blacklock, she went to Governor Toller's banquet? Why?”

“As a guest of this soldier, according to Jyp. What happened to 'I wish Kore would get a man.'?” Blacklock looked at Shawn's outraged expression.

“Yes but not a frigging Azorian soldier! Blacklock you know her opinions on the Military in general. Does that sound right to you?” Shawn exclaimed. “She's ill, she must be. Concussion, a seizure, insanity.”

“Jyp do you have any water in here? Kore seems to have a raised temperature.” Kore had nothing of the sort and Blacklock knew it. Jyp nodded and ambled off through a side door. “Shawn please bear in mind who's telling this tale, for shit's sake. Jyp is in no way, shape, or form, a liar but he'll tell a situation as he sees it. Kore has obviously met this man and agreed to go to Toller's party because of him, not necessarily with him. I may be wrong but I don't think the armed, on duty guards are allowed to take guests to a Governmental dinner.” Blacklock explained.

“No, of course not.” Shawn nodded and settled down slightly. “So why would Jyp think they were a couple?”

“Because he's Jyp.” Blacklock sighed and smiled. “He sees Kore and this man having a private conversation, Kore's mood changes, so does her behaviour and the next thing she's swanning off to the Villa dressed to the nines! He took her, remember? It doesn't take much working out why she might go and see him again today, her brother's just been lifted and he's in the Military. Jyp added two and two together and got seven, that's all. Ah thanks Jyp.” Blacklock watched Jyp gently lay a cloth on Kore's forehead. He really did think the world of her.

“She must have gone to see him today because she thought he had something to do with Leo's arrest.” Shawn reasoned. “She won't have gone for his help, because that just isn't Kore. She'd never go straight to the authorities without trying us lot first. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Blacklock frowned at Kore's sword. “The fact that she's here crying and not in jail for murder suggests that this soldier persuaded her that the arrest wasn't of his doing. Why would you think it was, Kore?” Blacklock mused. “Something to do with that party, it must be.”

“That party she told no one about? The one I intend asking her about? There's no need for all this secrecy, it worries us all.” Shawn said moodily.

“Shoon minding own business.” Jyp said casually and Shawn glared at him. “Why have Little Lady to telling you, or you too, all things? Is itty-bitty rude in opinion of Jyp.”

“Jyp you don't understand.” Shawn said patiently. “I'm not talking about secret boyfriends and the like.”

“Jyp not too either.” Jyp shrugged. “But if Little Lady have secret boyfriend then is OK too. Jyp meaning if Little Lady's plans is meaning for you all to hear now then her be telling you now. Her must be having reasons, and not us reasons for now.”

“That's you told.” Blacklock smirked. “He's right Shawn. I know she's hot-headed and bad tempered but her reasoning's usually pretty sound. If we harass her for reasons for her behaviour regarding her own twin she'll go ape-shit. It'll suggest we don't trust her. You're just pissy because there's another man on the scene.”

“I am not.” Shawn retorted. “So do we sit here with her all night? Or do we wake her and take ... ask her if she'd like to go home?”

“We leave her here with Jyp, as we found her.” Blacklock stood up and Shawn didn't look convinced at all. “Shawn she came here, alone, for a reason, we have no right to intrude on her pain at this time. She doesn't want to be at home, surrounded by people otherwise she'd have gone there. Come on, we've found her and we know she's safe. Jyp? Will you let us out please?” Jyp nodded and hoisted the bookcase away from the door. He watched the two gladiators turn the corner of Blue Lane before resuming his vigil on the library steps.

It was well into the night when Kore did eventually wake up, cursing and swearing about the floor being hard.

“Do you think Leo is asleep, Jyp?” Kore sat on the steps with her friend and looked for her stars.

“Jyp think Leo is missing Little Lady, not asleep.” Jyp nodded. “Jyp not sleeping for many nights when Kah lefted.”

“Kah? Who's Kah?” Kore asked.

“Brother of Jyp.”

“You have a brother?” Kore said in surprise. She'd never thought of Jyp having a family and felt immediately ashamed of herself for not even putting any pass on it.

“Him went bad.” Jyp sighed heavily. “Kah having some bad friends and him lefted farm on Nellatia because friends have told him them gets big monies. Friends get big lots of onyx stones from other mens and them selling them all over many lands for mens. Is bad though. Mens not owning stones in start. Them's thieved all of stones.” He said sadly. “Kah is big dick-head.”

“That's a shame Jyp, a very dangerous way to live. So you had a farm on Nellatia?”

“Jyp and Kah, yes. Jyp too sad and farm too big after Kah lefted. Knoss taking Jyp off farm to be famous fighter. Jyp was fool to trust asshole as him.” The giant shrugged his huge shoulders.

“No, not a fool. He took advantage of your situation. I bet his missus gave him what-for when he went back without you eh?” Kore grinned and Jyp started to laugh. “And as for being famous, well everyone here's heard of you and how you're a free man now, even the Military knows Jyp Freeman.”

“Thems do?” Jyp said in surprise. “Jyp not joining Military so them can get that out of heads.” He sniffed. “Jyp doing as pleases and not for using of soldiers as scary shield.”

“Good for you.” Kore applauded. “You need sleep Jyp, we'll go home.” She stood up.

“Little Lady stay close to Leo's books if wanting? Jyp is fine and dandy.”

“I know. You'd sit all night. No, Leo's books will be here tomorrow too. Let's go home.” Jyp pulled the library door closed and they set off down Blue Lane.

The pit was in it's usual state of darkness and Kore automatically went to sidestep a boulder she knew was in the gateway. The next thing she knew, she was flat on her face in the mud.

“Damn, blast and buggery! Who moved that stone?” The obstructive boulder had been moved to another location, still as obstructive. Jyp darted over to pick Kore up off the ground and Kore was staring at the rusted iron gates.

“Shite! Little Lady is hurt? Bah on mud on knees see now.” Jyp fussed.

“Jyp? Jyp I have to go out.” Kore said quickly, her stomach knotted.

“Us not gone in yet.” Jyp pointed out.

“I know but I have to go out again.” Kore wriggled away from Jyp.

“OK and fine. Jyp go out also.” As though that was ever in any doubt.

Kore ran as fast as she could through the narrow back lanes of the town, Jyp easily keeping up with her. She picked up pace when she saw the lights illuminating the Ambassadorial Guest Villa.

“Wait for me Jyp, please?” Kore said as a request for the giant Nellatian to stay out of sight.

“All of week if Jyp must.” Jyp gave her a broad grin and headed off towards a privet hedge. It amazed Kore at how this enormous man had the ability to hide in natural foliage like this.

It wasn't the first time she'd seen him disappearing before her eyes into a mass of greenery. Kore turned and sprinted up the path that lead to the guarded Villa, the two on the door being two Cadets.

“Clear off.” One of them said rudely.

“I'm here to see Captain Creed. It's very important I see him and he does know me. Will you tell him Kore needs to see him urgently please?” Kore tried to catch her breath.

“No I won't.” The Cadet yawned. “All the ladies need to see Creed urgently, you'll have to wait until tomorrow. Shit the man has to sleep sometime.”

“Look you buffoon!” Kore rasped. “Do I look like a 'lady'?” She turned slightly so the Cadet could

see her sword. "My name is Kore and I'm the gladiator arena champion. My brother was arrested this afternoon. Enough information for you? Is Captain Creed here?"

"Why would the arena champ come here?" The second Cadet walked towards Kore to get a better look at her. "It is her, Bowman." He nodded to his colleague.

"Thank you, yes it is me. I'm here to see Captain Creed and I was told he was here supervising some building work." Kore tried to stay calm and not shout. She'd promised Creed she wouldn't get herself arrested too and her own sense backed up that wise notion.

"Come with me. I'll check." Bowman pushed open the Villa doors. "I'm not sure if he's on duty right now." He lead Kore into a massive white stoned hallway. "Stay in there and don't touch anything. Rilux will search you if you try and leave here without me." Bowman lead Kore into a small waiting room, small in comparison with the rest of the palatial Villa. Kore sat on a padded couch and looked at the rows and rows of leather bound books stacked neatly along dark-wood shelves. Leo would have loved it in this room. Kore herself was quite educated too, courtesy of Leo, although not to his own high standard.

"Arsehole!" A very irate Cadet pushed the door open with his elbow and struggled into the room with an armful of books. He was very surprised indeed to see Kore sitting in there.

"Oh! Hello again." He put down the stack of books. "You were in the barracks this afternoon. I'm Cadet Rowan." Rowan looked very pleased indeed to see Kore again.

"I remember, yes." Kore nodded and smiled. "Actually I'm here to see Captain Creed again. The other Cadet has gone to see if he's around."

"Ah I'm sorry miss, he isn't." Rowan said apologetically and Kore swore under her breath. "Do that again." Rowan blinked at Kore.

"Eh? Er ... horse-shit and damnation." Kore repeated, giving the Cadet a funny look.

"No not that, the scowl! Here come under the light a bit." Rowan said eagerly and Kore backed away a few steps, glowering menacingly at the Cadet. "Shit! How ... who ... I never even noticed this afternoon! By the stars!" Rowan stood with his mouth open.

"I'm about two seconds from relieving you of your spleen." Kore growled. "Stop gibbering and start making sense!"

"I'm ... I'm sorry! Poor Captain Creed! No wonder he was acting a bit odd. I helped arrest his lady's twin brother!" Rowan squeaked.

"His lady has a twin brother? Oh, I see what you mean." Kore scowled at the Cadet. "You arrested Leo?" She tightened her grip on her sword.

"No! I was ordered there as back-up, reluctantly, may I add. I reported the whole thing to Captain Creed. He's a very good man, by the way, you're a lucky girl." Rowan informed her.

"Blah!" Kore exclaimed. "Never mind all that shite! Where is he? I need to speak with ..." Her sentence was cut short by the door opening. General Louis Marx gave Kore a very hard stare before turning to glare at Rowan.

"Dismissed, Cadet Rowan." He said darkly.

“Sir, the lady ...”

“I will add the word 'permanently' to that if I have to say it again.” Marx threatened. Rowan looked apologetically at Kore before leaving the room.

“I remember you this time.” Kore said and uncertainty flashed over Marx's face. “The Governor's banquet? You showed me in, although I was dressed a bit differently. I believe I've had a wasted journey. The person I came to see isn't here so I'll get out of your way.”

“Would your visit have anything to do with your brother's arrest?” Marx asked.

“Not directly, no.” Kore answered truthfully.

“I don't believe you. Creed wasn't on duty then either, why ask for Creed?” Marx said, narrowing his eyes at Kore.

“As I said, that isn't why I'm here.” Kore repeated. “Why I ask for Creed is none of your concern, General.”

“He's a Captain in the Military. Everything he does is a concern of mine.” Marx sniffed.

“Well you, yourself just pointed out that he's off duty, so I'll bid you goodnight and take up no more of your time.” Kore desperately needed out of that room. She knew her own mood and her own temper and she knew it was bubbling very close to the surface. Marx had arrested Leo, Kore could tell. If he was going to try and provoke her into doing something rash then Kore knew for a fact that he'd succeed.

“Don't you want to know what he did?” Marx's voice stopped Kore at the doorway. “I thought that would get your interest. If you play nice, I might tell you.”

“Up yours.” Kore sneered and Marx spun her round by the arm. Kore grabbed for her sword and Marx dealt her such a backhand over the jaw that it almost knocked her out cold. Marx stood on her arm and simply took the sword from her.

“No good in confined spaces.” Marx said arrogantly. “Is that because you're a gladiator? Or is it because you're a dirty Athulan savage that grew up in the wilds?”

“I grew up in the pit.” Kore wiped the blood from her mouth.

“Not for the first decade of your miserable life you didn't. I should know, I was there when you were captured.” Marx watched in satisfaction as the shock registered, and registered deep. Kore remembered. “I still have your savage little teeth-mark on my hand. You were an animal then, and you're an animal now. Did you think a job in a library would make a man out of a savage?” He laughed and Kore lunged at him, elbowing him just above his eye, splitting the skin wide open. “You little bitch!” Marx bellowed and Kore ran from the room. “Stop her!” Bowman ran from his position at the door to tackle Kore. She skidded to a U turn and ran blindly down a thick-carpeted corridor. She could hear the commotion behind her as the soldiers gave chase and turned a corner into another corridor that looked exactly the same as the first one. Kore heard the words 'alarm' 'assassin' and was almost certain she heard 'DeGaise' too. She didn't have time to stand and think on this and ran up a flight of stairs when she heard booted footsteps running in her direction. Kore cursed and swore when she found herself in what could have been the same corridor as she set out

in. She was completely lost and disorientated, the soldiers, however, were not.

Vespus Creed was standing in his immediate superior General's personal barracks. He'd been there for two hours and told the same story at least a dozen times.

“Describe her again.” General Ben Astrella tried to fight with his reeling senses at what he was hearing. The whole situation was incredible in the extreme but for Ben, the most astonishingly shocking thing were the two 'pawns' in the whole set-up.

“She's tiny Sir, as I said. She stands no more than shoulder height to me, probably less, although the other twin is almost as tall as I am, given his opposite gender. She has hair the colour of polished gold, as does her brother, only hers is to her waist. They both have eyes the colour of cornflowers, cornflowers the size of that tankard top at that. Sir she is who I say she is, she's the arena champion, I've seen her in there myself.”

“I'm not doubting your word Vespus.” Ben said in a daze. “Leo is quite a popular name but have you ever come across another Kore?”

“None Sir, none at all. They sometimes use the name Blacklock, after the trainer, but Kore told me herself that's because they don't know their birth name. They're war orphans.”

“I know they are.” Ben rubbed his temples. He was looking forward to his bed after his stint in the First Quarter but hadn't even got as far as his barracks when Captain Creed approached him with an urgent matter. “You aren't going to believe this Vespus but I was the one who brought them to Azoria, ten years ago.” He told the astonished Captain of their discovery of the two children, Pape and Marx's actions towards them and his and Faust's intervention and cover-up of their passage into Azoria. “I didn't honestly reckon much to their survival chances at all and it took me months to train myself not to think about their fates. Vespus, they survived against monumental odds in the Pit! Kore positively flourished in there, obviously. Faust Cooper often said I should give Blacklock more credit than I did, by hell he was right. The man deserves deity status, in my opinion.”

“That goes part way in explaining Marx and therefore Pape's personal attitudes towards them. The other part is just pure shit of their own minds.” Vespus said in disgust and Ben rose his eyebrows at him. “Er ... sorry Sir. I realise there's a difference between off the record and blatant disrespect. My apologies.”

“Do I look offended?” Ben smiled.

“Sir, if I hadn't coerced that girl to go to that wretched banquet then Marx and Pape would never have known of their existence.” Creed sighed. “What a bloody walloping she gave Pape, unarmed too and dressed in a silk dress and slippers.”

“Serves Pape right for not wearing standard uniform.” Ben smirked. “Yes I know, you mean Kore, loosen up man. You can't blame yourself for that, you know, they aren't exactly hidden, especially not now-a-days. Vespus, there are thousands of people every week go through that arena, are you seriously trying to say that no one would have recognised Kore, and therefore Leo, at all? Vice versa when you consider the library is a public building. You made the connection straight away when you saw Leo in the lane.”

“You can say that again. I almost fainted. Imagine how disconcerting it is to see the exact same face on a six foot man as you've just seen on a five foot girl!” Creed exclaimed. “Which reminds me, I need to warn Cadet Rowan that Honour Felsus has her eye on him.” He said grimly. “Sir I can't find out why Leo was arrested. Every way I try to look into it, General Marx seeps out of the stonework

and has it covered. He doesn't trust me, and never has.”

“Nor you him, I suspect.” Ben observed. “Shit we don't need that crap just now of all times. We're due an Ambassadorial visit that could result in Azoria and Tibrae more or less forcing Killian and the out-plains to conform to the recognised legal system. That's confidential, by the way.” Creed nodded his understanding. “I'll go ...”

“General Astrella, Sir?” A Cadet by the name of Lumni knocked and entered Ben's barracks room. “Sir Cadet Rowan is here looking for Captain Creed. He's very agitated Sir.”

“Crap. What now?” Ben scowled.

“Kore. Hell girl, what have you done now?” Creed muttered darkly. “May we see him Sir?” Creed asked Ben. “He's the one who I spoke with regarding all this. I asked him to keep an eye on Kore to make sure she didn't charge off and do someone over.” Ben nodded and tried not to laugh at Lumni's face when he heard Creed's word's regarding Kore. Rowan just about fell into the room, fighting for breath.

“Sir. General Astrella please excuse this intrusion.” He panted. “I must speak with you Captain Creed, regarding the ... thing.”

“It's OK Rowan, General Astrella is fully aware of the 'thing'.” Creed told the Cadet.

“Fair enough Sir. Our 'thing' isn't a public display.” Rowan turned to look aloofly at the other Cadet, obviously somewhat proud to have a 'thing' going with two senior officers. Lumni stood his ground and certainly wasn't going to be ordered out by another Cadet, 'thing' or not.

“Thank You Lao.” Ben smiled and nodded at Cadet Lumni, who gave Rowan a dirty look before leaving.

“Pfft.” Rowan sniffed after him. “Oh mercy me Sir we have to go!” He started to flap at Creed. “The Ambassadorial Villa, your lady friend came looking for you there but got General Marx instead. I have nothing solid Sir and I may be over-reacting but he looked very menacing indeed. He ordered me to leave and I have the strongest suspicion that she's in trouble.”

“Hell's balls!” Creed growled, grabbing his sword. “All I damned well asked was for her to keep her foul-tempered self low profile for a while.”

“Excuse me?” Ben interrupted. “Why are you using the Ambassadorial Villa to entertain your lady friend?” He asked in confusion.

“No! Sir it's Kore. Shut up Rowan.” Creed snapped. “Sir if she kicks up a fuss, the entire Pit will come out in support, as we said earlier. I should go and ...”

“Sir!” Lumni was back. “General Astrella Sir, code one alarm at the Ambassadorial Villa. An assassin is on the loose and General Marx has reason to believe lives are in danger.” Ben just looked at Creed and Rowan in complete shock before grabbing his sword and running out of the barracks.

Kore ran through a dining hall and into another adjoining waiting room, only to find it had no other doors. She looked round in near panic as she heard raised voices and footsteps getting louder as the Military approached.

“In here girl!” a gruff voice echoed from ... nowhere. Kore looked round the room in confusion,

then headed for a small window that was about twenty feet off the ground. "The hatch on the wall! Get in it Kore." She looked at the far wall and noticed a sliding wooden panel ajar midway up it.

"Who are you?" She hissed into the hatch which contained some sort of pulley system and a sturdy shelf.

"Just get in the hell-rotten hatch! Hurry up!" The voice rumbled up the shaft. Kore scrambled into the two foot square hole in the wall and said a prayer of thanks to her petite mother for her diminutive stature. The shelf began to move in a jolted descent and Kore could hear Marx barking out orders to ransack the waiting room. She sprang off the shelf as soon as another hatch opened and permitted light. Kore stood, sword drawn, facing an older man who was still obviously in a fit physical condition. He was stockily well built with greying hair and tanned, weathered skin. He was also gaping at Kore, sword just hanging at his side, in complete amazement.

"Thank you." Kore lowered her sword. "I'll flex my biceps for you later but for now, I think we should get out of here before the moron squad find that hatch."

"Good idea. This way." The man lead Kore through a dimly lit kitchen that obviously wasn't being used just now and into a smaller room lined with jars of preserves. At the end of this room was a split wooden door that lead to the herb gardens at the back of the Villa. "No, this way." Kore had started to head round to the right side of the building where she could alert Jyp. "Trust me Kore, Jyp is with me. He's waiting for us behind the armoury wall." Kore had no time to question this man at all but obviously Jyp had trusted him enough to tell him his name to begin with and that was enough for Kore.

The Ambassadorial Villa had been turned inside out and searched from top to bottom to no avail and the mood in the huge study of the building was very tense and very dark indeed. In the study sat two Generals, Two Captains and four Cadets. Cadets Bowman and Rilux were decidedly edgy as they stood in the middle of the room, on an unseen divide. General Marx, and Captain Pape on one side and General Astrella, Captain Creed, and Cadets Rowan and Lumni on the other. Governor Spence Toller flung the door open and strode in and he was far from impressed at being dragged there at such a ridiculous hour.

"This had better be damned good." He snarled, seating himself in front of the unlit fireplace.

"Sir I suggest we start from when this alleged assassin approached the building." Ben spoke up. "For mine and Captain Creed's benefit as well as your own, we weren't here until the alarm was raised." He looked daggers at Marx and Pape.

"A young lady came to the gates here Sir." Bowman said officiously. "She said she was looking for Captain Creed who was overseeing building work. Cadet Rilux assured me that she wasn't just a tar ... a passing curious visitor, and I lead her to the side library to wait while I went to check if Captain Creed was on duty. General Marx informed me that he was not but that he'd take care of the visitor, who he presumed was a brothel-girl in search of the Captain. I returned to the front door and was called upon, by General Marx, to stop the young girl some time later, as she tried to flee the building. It transpired that she was no brothel girl, Sir, but a would-be assassin. General Marx had disarmed her but she escaped into the house. Cadet Rilux and myself were among those who gave chase." Bowman stood to attention and Rilux nodded his confirmation of Bowman's account.

"So where do you two fit in?" Toller's eyes bored into the other two Cadets.

"Captain Pape told me to re-shelve some books Sir." Rowan said. "I came upon the young lady in

question by chance. I had no idea she was in the side library. I asked if she was being attended to and she told me she was waiting to see if Captain Creed was available. I knew that he wasn't and commented to that effect. General Marx came in at that point and dismissed me. I took advantage of the early dismissal to go and see Captain Creed myself, Sir. I had need of his help this afternoon regarding the registration of an unconventional grade report." Rowan glanced at Marx, then at Creed who sincerely hoped his smug grin wasn't too obvious. Good one Rowan! Question that if you dare, Marx. "I found out that Captain Creed was reporting to his superior General, General Astrella, who has been on business in another Quarter. Cadet Lumni requested an audience with both General Astrella and Captain Creed on my behalf. Cadet Lumni returned shortly after I'd been admitted to the General's barracks, to announce the code one alarm, Sir." Ben looked at Creed in pleasant surprise. Cadet Rowan was very, very, good at verbalising reports like this, something which wasn't immediately apparent on first meeting the man.

"Exactly as Cadet Rowan said, Sir." Lumni agreed. "Rowan, myself, General Astrella and Captain Creed rushed here and found the search already under way. We joined in, obviously. General Marx even assigned Captain Creed to his own party, Sir, and Ordered his own Captain, Captain Pape, to accompany General Astrella. I believe that was for co-ordination purposes, seeing as some of the building had been searched already by the time we arrived." Creed believed differently. He believed that Marx and Pape split forces to keep an eye on anyone, if anyone, found by Ben or himself.

"Do you often visit your General, out of hours, in his own rooms regarding reports, Creed?" Marx asked innocently.

"No, not often. General Astrella has been away in Quarter One and I'm travelling to Quarter Two tomorrow. I saw no other opportunity to pass on reports, Sir." Creed answered evenly.

"I see. General Astrella, isn't it a bit irregular to receive not only a Captain in your private rooms, but also two Cadets? They just ... happened to be there, did they?" Marx said.

"Not irregular for me General." Ben shrugged. "I'm a General, responsible for other men, they need to know where to find me. Obviously they do." He nodded at Creed and the Cadets. "No, they didn't just happen to be there, you've just heard that. Creed came to handover reports and Rowan came for Creed's help regarding a matter of his own. Lumni was on barrack duty." Ben shrugged. "Cadet Rilux, how did you know this visitor wasn't a brothel-girl?"

"Well she wasn't dressed like one Sir." Rilux replied.

"But you saw her too, Bowman. Why did you need reassuring that she wasn't a call-girl when you saw the same girl in the same clothes as Rilux did?" Ben turned to look at the other Cadet.

"I couldn't see her properly Sir, I was further away and the shadow was across her face." Bowman glanced nervously at General Marx.

"Ah so you presumed she was a call-girl because she wasn't dressed like one? Rilux, again, how did you know she wasn't a brothel-girl?" Ben said quietly.

"I recognised her Sir." Rilux muttered to the floor. "And she told us her name too just to back it up."

"Go on." Ben urged.

"She told us her name was Kore and that she was the gladiator champion, Sir. I recognised her from the arena."

“Thank you. Rowan, when you went into the side library and saw this girl, did you know who she was?” Ben chose his word carefully.

“Yes Sir, she told me.” Rowan answered promptly and perfectly. “As I was on duty, I introduced myself and she told me her name was Kore and that she was there to see Captain Creed.”

“What was she doing?” Ben asked.

“Well she wasn't doing anything Sir.” Rowan looked a bit confused. “She was sitting on the bench waiting for Cadet Bowman to return, I presume.”

“So she wasn't snooping around or making an attempt to sneak out of the room un-noticed?”

“No, she was sitting on the bench in there. I startled her as much as she startled me.” Rowan nodded.

“So she was on her own, unguarded, in fact no other guards in sight at all. Bowman had gone to find Creed, Rilux was outside and she didn't know you were around. So this assassin just sat there?” Ben shook his head and looked at Governor Toller. “Doesn't that sound a bit odd Sir? Why would an assassin introduce herself at all, let alone by her real name, request to speak to a Military officer, then just sit on her own in a room waiting for a Military escort?”

“Sounds like a load of old crap to me!” Toller barked and glared at Marx.

“She planned on eluding us once she had a rough plan of the outlay of the building Sir.” Marx said calmly. “As for identifying herself, well does that make a difference seeing who she is? That isn't meant as a discriminatory remark Sir. They needed their best and they sent their best. It's notoriously difficult prosecuting gladiators because they close ranks and make it hard to find proof for anything. This was how it was intended on this occasion too Sir. She challenged me to 'prove it' before assaulting me and escaping into the building. May I ask a question of Captain Creed?” Marx tried to turn the attention away from himself. “It's been established that this gladiator girl was recognised here and that she specifically asked for you, claiming that you knew who she was and that you would want to see her. Why would she claim to know an Azorian Military Captain? Does she know you?”

“Yes Sir, she does.” Creed answered stiffly. “I had the need to speak with her on a social matter on a certain occasion.”

“Go on.” Marx pressed.

“That's all, Sir.” Creed said shortly.

“That's all?” Marx let out a derisory laugh. “This is a serious meeting Captain! Governor Toller himself was called to attend in the middle of the night! 'A social matter on a certain occasion' just will not do. Do you understand me? Do you understand the gravity of this meeting?”

“Yes Sir, of course I do. I'm not in a position to disclose the nature of my dealings with Kore the gladiator girl.” Creed said stubbornly.

“Sir, please!” Marx implored Governor Toller. “If this girl is somehow influential in Captain Creed's life and way of thinking, then it could be very important. She has assaulted me and ran amok in an Ambassadorial Villa. She now knows the layout of the place and by her very nature, is a potential

danger. Please bear in mind that Lord and Ambassador Astrella are due here soon. General Astrella, I'm surprised and very disappointed in your short-sighted disregard for your parents' potential well-being!" He said dramatically. "You are a weak link in our security, Captain Creed, a link that will be exploited using the charms of this girl."

"He does have point." Toller mused. "Albeit a very long-winded one, more of a trench than a point. Creed? Are you involved with the gladiator?" He asked bluntly.

"If I was, then I certainly wouldn't discuss my private life in a Military meeting." Creed stated. "No Sir, I am not involved with the gladiator in the romantic way that's being portrayed." Rowan's eyes opened wide and he looked at Creed in confusion. "The reason I'm not in a position to discuss my social dealing with her is because I was acting on someone else's behalf." He looked straight at Governor Toller and willed the senile old coot to remember the damned banquet. Even the Governor wouldn't want to drag out the fact that he'd fancied a bit of gladiator rough, at a Military meeting, especially as he didn't get it. "I delivered a certain invitation to the girl."

"Messenger boy? Yes well that can be disregarded." The penny dropped, thankfully, thus getting Creed off the hook regarding his associations with Kore. "Really Marx, you are a gossip."

"As you wish Sir." Marx fumed. "Even so, I'd strongly recommend that an officer other than Captain Creed, go to arrest this gladiator."

"Arrest?" Ben butted in again. "For running through the Villa? As far as I know she didn't cause one scrap of damage to anything at all. There isn't any proof whatsoever to even hint at that assassination claim. She came to see Creed, he wasn't here, she set off to return home, you assumed her motives to be nefarious because of her status and occupation." He raised his voice. He'd heard enough of Marx's bullshit. All he was going to do here was throw as much irrelevant crap into the situation as he could and turn it into some sort of scandal that he could work on. Toller would eventually get fed up, and lost, listening to who's charming whom, and conclusions based on prejudice, and just arrest the cause of it, Kore, until the Military argued itself to a settlement. That could take an age and Ben had seen it all before and every time involving Louis Marx. "What do assassins do, General Marx?" Ben asked suddenly.

"What?" Marx frowned at Ben. "An assassin is one who acts on behalf of a body, usually, and in this case, the gladiators, to eliminate an influential or important individual. Don't play games Astrella, I'm sure the Governor is in no mood."

"The Governor most definitely isn't." Toller snapped. "What sort of moronic question is that Astrella?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, I've been away on duty, but isn't the south wall under repair?" Ben asked and Marx nodded. "So security measures would mean that no dignitaries would be housed on the premises, only the staff involved in the repairs and the supervising Military. Who did she intend to assassinate, Marx? There's no one here. She knew Creed was supervising the repairs, that's why she came here. She told that to Bowman, he's just stated as much. I suppose she might not have known that our security laws mean that the place can't be occupied in this condition, but you know." Ben pointed at Marx. "You issued a code one alarm due to an assassination threat that you knew was impossible. Even you aren't pompous enough to assign yourself ambassadorial status Marx."

"It does seem as though you acted a tad pre-emptively, Marx." Toller glared at the General. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, however. I can see how the appearance of a gladiator at an Ambassadorial Villa would automatically arouse suspicions among a Military guard." Ben tried not to heave too loudly. "I'm not sure about the Cadets present here's involvement in official issues over

this last day, but the ranked officers here will appreciate an extra factor that might cause General Marx to react over cautiously regarding this gladiator in particular.” He paused to let this sink in. Leo's arrest. “The code one alarm should never have been issued, and I'm confident that if General Marx had thought more deeply into it, and the security laws, then he'd never have ordered it. Panic, gentleman, nothing more.” Toller concluded. “This incident will be reported as a preventative measure based on a senior officer's reasonable doubt of an unauthorised person on a guarded, official premises. Good night gentlemen.” He glowered at the officers in general then stalked out of the room.

“You didn't expect me to be reprimanded did you Astrella?” Marx drawled.

“I didn't realise this was about you, Marx.” Ben said nastily. “I do think he was right though, you did panic, but I think you had a different reason for doing so than Kore turning up to haunt you. You would never have reflexively thought to issue that level warning unless there was a real need. You cocked up by forgetting that this 'need' wasn't public knowledge, didn't you?”

“You're overly tired Astrella, go and get some sleep.” Marx sniffed.

“Who was here Marx?” Ben said darkly. “Why were you here? Generals don't oversee construction work in case they get their hands dirty, especially not jumped up ones like you. You took advantage of a temporarily unused building for something and that something involved a person who warranted a code one alarm when you panicked because a 'rebel' broke loose. Am I pretty close? While I'm on the subject, why did she take off? She didn't flee from Bowman and she was alone in the room with him too. Why did she assault you and only you? Maybe for the same reason she did all those years ago?”

“You're digging on very dangerous ground Astrella.” Marx pointed in Ben's face. “Dig too far and you'll fall through the surface and be eaten up by what's going on underneath. Pape!” He stormed out of the study, Pape obediently following.

Chapter 11

Jyp knocked Kore's rescuer clean off his feet en-route to grab Kore and hoist her off hers.

“Damn, shite, hell and pox!” Jyp ranted. “Jyp is extreme crap in looking after Little Lady! Jyp meaning to get among 'Bassador's house and castrate whole lots of whoresons!”

“Jyp I can't breath.” Kore wheezed and the giant released her from the bear-hug. “Calm down. Yes, I mean it Jyp, calm down or you'll set off your illness.” Kore said seriously. Jyp clenched and unclenched his huge fists and tried to take deep breaths. “I'm fine, you can see that. It wasn't your fault, do you understand?” The last thing Kore needed was Jyp taking ill while it was possible that the Military could still be in pursuit. It wasn't exactly easy to hide a Nellatian, let alone a sick one. “It was no one's fault but my own. Don't argue, it's true. I just presumed Creed would be there instead of checking it out properly first.” She turned to the older man who'd rescued her from the Villa. “He's prone to seizures.” She explained. “If he goes berserk then he'll take out half the Military. You've seen what he's like regarding my safety, so I'm extremely impressed that you managed to persuade him not to crash through the Villa like a tornado, let alone leave the grounds altogether. So you have me at a disadvantage. You called me by my name but I don't know who I'm thanking here for my rescue.”

“Allow an old man a moment of emotion.” The man got to his feet and he had a look of utter astonishment on his face mixed with something was close to tears. Kore automatically backed off a bit and became edgy. She didn't understand this at all and found herself unable to fathom this man's reactions to her and that was so rare it made her wary. “Seeing you now has unleashed all sorts of emotions to race through my head. It's incredible.”

“Well I'm pleased I've produced a legal 'high' for you, and I'm grateful for your help back there, but if you're just going stand there and stare at me then I really should be going. Come on Jyp.” Kore turned to go.

“No, don't go. I'm sorry, how rude of me. My name is Faust Cooper and I'm a retired Azorian General.” Faust told Kore of the day she was found, with Leo, in the forests of Plaus. He told her of how he delivered them both into Blacklock's care and he explained that he hadn't expected either of them to survive childhood, hence his reaction to seeing her after ten years.

“I can't remember any of it.” Kore sat on the ground and sighed. “Or at least, I can't remember the people involved. Faust you're the second person tonight who's told me that they were instrumental to mine and Leo's passage to Azoria, after ten years of it never having cropped up at all. How did you know I was at the Villa and how did you know I was in trouble? Shit, Creed will have a meltdown.”

“I heard of Leo's arrest and went straight to Blacklock He told me that you apparently had some sort of communication going on with one of the Captains.” Faust said and Kore glanced at Jyp, who pretended he hadn't seen. “Given what Blacklock and Shawn had speculated on so far I wanted to offer you any help I could give you regarding Leo, in an ex-General type way.” He said vaguely. “You weren't where Blacklock had left you, in the library, and you weren't in the Pit. I found out that Creed had gone to the jail-house even though the arrest wasn't his, and that he was on

supervision duty at the Villa. I made the same assumption that you did, that he would be there. Just a few gaps remain. Why did you need Creed's help in such a hurry?"

"First off, I don't need Creed's help. We were sort of flung together and I took advantage of his Military status and his ability to access arrest records. I doubt they'd tell me." Kore said miserably. "I'm not sure exactly what Blacklock and Shawn are speculating on, but Creed and I are helping one another regarding Leo, that's all."

"Pardon my asking, but how did such a mutual arrangement come about? I can't think of any way at all that you'd know of each others' existence, let alone seek help from one another." Faust said. Kore looked suspiciously at Faust and he smiled. "Nosy old coot aren't I? I don't blame you for being suspicious. I'm not affiliated with the Military at all, Kore. I'm retired. If I had my time again, this present Military is not one I'd enlist for anyway, an opinion that had started forming ten years ago, as you can probably tell." Kore weighed the situation up for about five minutes and Faust left her in silence, with her own, very intelligent reasoning.

"For some warped reason Toller wanted me at Lady Toller's Birthday banquet up at the Villa." Kore went on to explain to the ex-General how Creed had ensured that she attended the party, but also stressed that it was a bygone issue and that she held no grudges because of that particular issue. "Obviously, I immediately thought that Creed had reneged on his word after I heard of Leo's arrest and went for an explanation from him. From it arose the association we have now." Kore exhaled loudly. "Great isn't it?"

"And tonight?" Faust asked carefully.

"That weasel Bonetti is inquiring of the cost of block hinges."

"What?" Faust laughed. "What in hell's name does he want block hinges for? Good grief the man's off his head. The last time those monsters were ordered was for ... for ... shit." Faust just looked at Kore in shock. "The Pit gates?"

"I didn't make the connection myself until I returned home tonight and fell into one of them. Faust, they're planning to re-secure the Pit."

"Hang on Kore, don't jump to conclusions. Those hinges are used on the bridges too." Faust informed her.

"If the bridges needed maintenance work then the Military would know. They get the job of supervising it all, so quite a bit of preparation would be needed to re-rout everything. Creed had no idea why Bonetti wanted block hinges either." Kore reasoned. "They need a damned good reason to do that and they know I'm a bad tempered harpy that would take on the lot of them for my brother, they also know I have a lot of respect and support from just about everyone in the Pit. They're orchestrating a riot and I very nearly gave one to them tonight just by appearing in Marx's presence. The asshole. I'm not even sure of Creed's integrity but he's the best of a bad bunch in my opinion. I wouldn't have a clue who else to go to with this."

"Yes I see that. Bent bastards. Can't go to the gladiators either without causing the riot they're wanting." Faust said thoughtfully. "From what I know of Creed, he's sound so I don't think you have any worries on that score."

"Why thank you General Faust." Creed's voice sounded before he came into view. "Gen ... shit!" Kore had acted purely on reflex and was now standing behind Creed with her sword to his kidneys.

“For shit's sake! You big oaf!” She cursed and sheathed her sword. “Hello Rowan, I presume you went to tell the Captain of the hunt at the Villa?” Rowan stepped out from behind a tree and nodded. “Did he manage to get through the door without clattering the rafters down?” Faust started laughing and Creed flared his nostrils at Kore. “I bet the ranks weren't like that in your day Faust.” Kore smiled at Creed. “This is twice I've put the fear of hell into him. Piss poor bunch aren't they?” She got no reply. “Faust? What's ... who's this?” Faust was standing next to Ben Astrella who looked close to fainting at the sight of Kore. “Oh don't tell me, you were part of the Kore and Leo rescue brigade of ten years ago too?” Ben just nodded. “Well here I am all grown up.”

“Absolutely.” Ben gawked and Faust tutted loudly. “You really haven't cha ... aaargh!” Jyp stood up from his position under a overhanging tree against the armoury wall. “Good grief! Please say I'm on your side.”

“Jyp is on Little Lady's side.” Jyp said predictably. “Captain soldier boy can pleasing self.”

“Jyp!” Kore jumped at her friend. “Jyp what did you call him?” She turned to look at Ben again.

“Not knowing him's name. Is OK?” Jyp looked at Kore in concern.

“No, I mean yes. It's fine Jyp. Captain Soldier?” Kore blinked at Ben and he nodded.

“Still inaccurate.” He smiled. “I was a Cadet then and I'm a General now. Ben Astrella.”

“I sat in your lap and you wrapped your cape round me.” Kore said numbly. “You told me and Leo to always be there for each other no matter what happened.”

“You don't know how pleased I am that you both took my advice.” Ben was recovering from his shock. “You done my hair up like a bloody wood-pixie. I got ribbed for weeks after I turned up at the barracks with the flowers and twigs still there.” Kore started to laugh. “It's true! Ask Faust. Kore I can't believe you and Leo made it.”

“Neither can anyone else.” Kore shrugged and sat against the wall. “I waited at the gates for weeks for you coming back.”

“Oh Kore.” Ben sat next to her and felt like crying. “I'm so sorry. If I'd done that, or even tried to check up on you both, then the authorities would want to know what I was doing.”

“I know. I realise that now, I didn't when I was ten.” Kore smiled. “I presume you thought we'd no longer be there by the time the Pit was unlocked?” Ben nodded and looked at his boots in shame.

“I should have checked.”

“No, not really. As you say, we were meant to disappear into a society of sorts and you and the others made sure that we did. I told Leo I would find you when I was as old as Blacklock so we could get married.”

“You did?” Ben started laughing. “Well you made a head start, no one's as old as Blacklock, maybe with the exception of Faust over there. Kore I promise you, they'll never re-lock that place as long as I'm breathing, and I'm not the only one who feels like that. You've shown how remarkable you are by not giving them a reason to arrest you and therefore cause a revolt.”

“Well the credit for that goes to your Captain over there. If he hadn't talked some sense into my hot-

head then I'd be in the next cell to Leo. I want him out of there Ben. I don't even know why he was arrested." Kore said miserably and Ben glanced at Faust who was busy talking about her with Jyp. "He doesn't know either."

"No. No he wouldn't know. There'd be no way for him to find out, nor Creed. Kore I'm a General, I know why he was arrested. I made it my business to go to the jail-house before coming here. Marx's horse-shit doesn't apply to me."

"So you can tell them what a load of crap it all is and get him out?" Kore felt a surge of hope and relief.

"I intended to do just that if it was the 'dissident' cry that Marx usually pulls out of his arse. Shit I'm not sure how to put this." Ben said awkwardly.

"You dare say 'matters of a delicate nature' and I'll rip you a new arse-hole." Kore snarled.

"Temper's never changed eh Kore? Marx was confident that he wouldn't get reprimanded tonight for issuing a false code one alarm and I know why now. Toller owes him a favour, Kore. Marx arrested his wife's lover." Ben actually inched away slightly from the explosive gladiator.

"Ooo!" Kore grinned. "I knew she had it in her! I told her to go and get herself fixed up, you know. I was with her most of the night ... umm hang on ..." Ben moved a few more inches and the rest of the men glanced at each other, then back to Kore. To everyone's relief, she started laughing. "Leo? Oh piss off Ben, you tit! My Leo and Ursus Toller? He's a bloody librarian for shit's sake! Get a grip."

"Kore, a number of items belonging to Lady Toller were found and confiscated from Leo's rooms, and vice versa. I saw the things myself, in the vaults." Ben grimaced. "Not the usual mementos passed between casual acquaintances."

"They aren't acquainted at all! I think Leo might have told me if he'd been knobbing the Governor's wife Ben. He hasn't even met her, as far as I know!" Kore exclaimed. "What items?"

"Just ... items." Ben said uncomfortably.

"His desk? Her gold-inlaid wash basin?" Kore badgered.

"Corsets!" Ben yelled. "A ... and such forth. Kore you aren't dense, use your brain a bit here. Items."

"Leo doesn't wear corsets." Kore half sobbed. "That can't be true Ben. Leo and Lady Toller? I'll go and slap her to sleep for being an adulterous strumpet." Kore got to her feet and Ben pulled her back down, earning him a stern glower from Jyp. "Have they locked her up too?" Kore demanded. "Why didn't she mention all this shit at the banquet? Her and my Leo? Ben, no." She shook her head stubbornly. "Just ... no! Leo isn't stupid. I know he's a hopeless romantic and I'm often winding him up about it, but he's not dense! He would not start carrying on with any married woman, let alone that one!"

"Kore calm down." Ben caught her flailing arms. "Maybe, just maybe, Leo wouldn't tell you everything about his private life. Would you tell him about yours in such detail? Especially if it involved a high profile person?"

"Yes!" Kore shrieked. "Well maybe not all of it, that's if I bloody well had a private damned life

which I don't!" She yelled hysterically. "OK so I might not fully know about my adult brother's personal life but I do know about his morals and standards. Leo would definitely, one hundred percent, never, ever, take another man's woman. Was it her that accused him of that? I'll rip her hair off!"

"Apparently it was one of Marx's infamous, anonymous tip-offs." Ben sighed. "So it almost certainly wasn't Lady Toller's doing. That doesn't alter the fact that a sack-full of her lingerie was found in Leo's rooms and Leo himself identified his own vests and shaving blades, along with library issue pencils, notes and a blotting pad with oeL on it."

"Oel? Who the f ... oh I see." Kore scowled. "I don't know who to go and assault first." She said desperately and Ben would have laughed if it hadn't been such a serious situation. "You don't know Leo like I do, no one does. It would be more believable if it was me and Ursus Toller rather than Leo." She said sulkily.

"That's enough for me Kore." Ben shrugged.

"Are you being a pervert?" Kore snapped.

"Huh? No!" Ben objected. "I meant your say-so on Leo is enough for me. You're right, none of us knows him, we didn't even know you'd been here these last few years. I'll bet you anything you like that Blacklock says the exact same thing as you've just said." He clarified. "Although Blacklock and Lady Toller doesn't hold the same appeal for me as you ..."

"OK I get your drift." Kore interrupted. "So Leo's been set up." She said flatly.

"Falsely, to bait you." Ben stated the obvious. "Problem is, how to refute those charges with the physical evidence that's already been collected? There was no irregularities in the procedure at all, I checked just in case. All I need is a slight deviation from the standard methods and I can rubbish the lot of it."

"And you'd do that?" Kore was quite surprised and quite impressed at Ben's influence. He appeared to have more clout than even the other Generals. "It might not make you very popular with the upper echelons as well as certain parts of your own Military."

"Oh I'll rely on my own natural charisma for my popularity." Ben smirked and Faust overheard him and rolled his eyes. "Marx isn't a stupid man though. The items that were confiscated were removed in the presence of a divisional General, that is himself, a second ranked officer, that is Pape, and the standard three Cadets, who were miraculously on the spot and not in their usually assigned Fourth Quarter. Isn't that amazing?" Ben said sarcastically. "The authorisation to enter your brother's rooms in his absence, and without prior notification to him, was given by a senior Administrator on the strength of this tip-off that Marx received. It would usually take more than just a tip-off but Marx played the 'parliament security' card, seeing as the Governor's wife was involved."

"Bonetti was the Administrator." Creed wandered over to sit with Ben and Kore. "Yes? I thought so. He's as bent as a vat-screw. I'm still struggling with the fact that he's considering securing the Pit. I'm such an idiot for not realising what he wanted block hinges for. I did wonder why I was suddenly relieved of that errand." He smiled. "It must have been in case I mentioned it to my 'lady friend' here." Creed smirked at Kore, then Ben.

"Ah yes!" Kore said. "So would anyone mind telling me where in blue buggery that idea came from?" She arched her eyebrows at the two soldiers.

“His own dirty mind, I would have thought.” Ben laughed.

“Hey! Not guilty.” Creed said defensively. “That was Rowan being presumptuous.”

“With all respect, Sir, you told me she had you pinned to the bed.” Rowan overheard the conversation. “What was a fellow supposed to think?” Kore just looked at Creed in surprise.

“And you took it out of context, Rowan. Actually, you did have me pinned to the bed, Kore, so I think we've found the source of the rumour.” Creed nudged Ben in the ribs and Kore started to laugh.

“It was Jyp who told Blacklock and Shawn you had a Soldier fancy-man.” Faust came over to join the party.

“Jyp also saying him useless.” Jyp said in his own defence and Creed looked rather offended. “Jyp have seen ladies before, you know. Them dress up all pretty like for fancy-mens, as Little Lady have doing. All frilly ribbons and dress having no front on. Not good for protection, by the ways, Little Lady.”

“Not much armour protection eh Jyp?” Ben laughed. “So Kore! It certainly does look like you started all this romantic speculation.”

“Horse-shit.” Kore was still laughing. “It's you lot with bad minds.”

“About this dress with no front on.” Ben turned to face Kore.

“Sod off.”

“Not a bad description actually. I saw it remember.” Creed mused.

“OK I'm going home.” Kore shook her head and stood up. “To be serious for a while, I can't believe I have so much help from such genuine people here. The last time me and Leo needed serious help we received it from more or less the exact same people, or at least, like minded people. I don't think I've ever had to rely on anyone as much as I'm doing now. I ... well ... I'm ...” Kore floundered and looked at her boots. She was exhausted, worried, and completely overwhelmed at her new company of friends. It had thrown her into complete turmoil. “I'm just not used to it. Sorry.” She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Ben had seen her do that ten years ago and right now, she looked exactly the same as she had then, frightened, lost and confused.

“Well you'd better start getting used to it.” Rowan said flatly. “We are the true Azorian Military, not that corrupt rabble up there. We're sworn to protect and defend Azoria and it's people, all of it's people.”

“Yep!” Ben agreed. “He's dead right, well said Rowan. Jyp, she's exhausted, you can see that.” Jyp nodded. “So if she suddenly decides she has to go somewhere, or do something, take no notice of her.” Jyp didn't look too sure about this. “No matter how much she yells and swears about it, just pick her up, take her home and stand in front of the door so she can't do a runner.” Kore smiled at the expression on Jyp's serious face.

“Jyp won't let me go anywhere” She helped. “I'm too tired to make sensible decisions Jyp, so we'll take the General's orders.” Jyp nodded at this and hoisted Kore up onto his shoulders. “Good night gentlemen.”

“Good night allbody.” Jyp echoed and wandered off into the darkness.

“That asshole needs thrown out of Azoria altogether, and prosecuted, in which ever order hurts the most.” Faust grumbled.

“Which one?” Ben asked. “Pape, Marx, or Bonetti? You do realise he's next in line for Governor? The way Toller carries himself on, he doesn't know where he is half the time so the people need a new hero.” He had the situation weighed up pretty well seeing as he'd been 'out of the loop' just recently. This was the reason why Ben was such an asset in whichever area he was involved in. Faust had taught him well to disregard confusion and interpret only what he saw. That included his perception of people. Ben knew that Kore's reactions and opinions were trusted because she had no reason to project any other sort. “I've not had chance to see Leo yet. Has anyone else? Apart from Marx, that is.” The other men shook their heads. “I can't get my head round the pair of them still being here.”

“Well I knew Kore was here although I didn't know who she was at all.” Creed said. “I'm often on guard in the arena.”

“Never was my pot of ale.” Faust said. “I expected Blacklock to safeguard them and keep them out of sight but I didn't expecting him training them up.” He laughed. “He's so very proud of them, Ben. Even though Leo took his way out of the game, he couldn't be more proud if they were his own. He was telling me about them growing up and he was close to tears, and that's quite an occurrence in someone like Blacklock. Even an old stiff like me was a bit ... wafty ... when I found out about them, and especially when I actually saw the girl.”

“I was their age when I promised them it would be OK.” Ben said. “That hasn't changed, even though ten years has passed. How the hell can a gladiator look like that?” This made the other men laugh, given Ben's reputation with the fairer sex. “I'm serious!” He laughed. “Gladiators have the obligatory facial scar and half an ear, and that goes for both genders. What's more, they're all at least six feet tall!”

“That's the only difference between Kore and Leo.” Creed commented. “Gender and height.”

“Well thank you for ruining that, Vespus.” Ben said sarcastically. “So do you think if we all went home for some rest, anything catastrophic will happen?”

“Doubtful.” Creed rubbed his eyes. “Jyp won't let her move, I wouldn't have thought. Do you intend going to see Leo, Ben? There's no way Marx will have me within a mile of him.”

“I'll go and see him tomorrow.” Ben nodded. “Now that Kore isn't here, do any of you think that it's remotely possible that Leo actually is involved with Lady Toller? She's a very refined and elegant woman and she's a total mis-match for that silly old fool.”

“Even if he was, like Kore said, he wouldn't be stupid enough to leave his undergarments strewn all over her rooms, nor her his.” Creed said. “I've met Ursus Toller a few times and I agree with you Ben. Good woman wilting away with a man like that. I doubt her and Leo are involved, but they damned well should be.” He noticed the look of shock on Rowan's face at this candid talk. “No ranks regarding this, Rowan.” He shrugged. “No Sirs, Captains, or Generals. It's far more important than that.”

“Yes it is.” Rowan agreed. “It's obscene and frightening what our own authorities are doing. If this

situation hadn't arose then I wanted out. I didn't want to be a part of that crap and I'm not the only one who thinks like that. Lumni, for one, has requested a relocation to Tibrae. Sir I honestly think that if the worst happens and the Government does get it's revolt, then it'll get a sharp shock as to it's lack of Military support.”

“It'll only get it's revolt if the gladiators have need to support Kore.” Faust said. “Her emotions and temperament are the only ammunition they have at the moment, the bastards. So far Creed has appealed to her intelligence and sense, very successfully.” Faust nodded his respect at Creed. “Intelligence sometimes doesn't come into the picture when your patience runs out. She needs to be redirected away from rash actions. She needs to be ... kept usefully busy ... for want of a better phrase.”

“Well she'll be usefully busy in that arena tomorrow.” Creed stated. “I pity the poor bugger who's in there with her just now.”

Chapter 12

Even Blacklock winced as he watched his pupil's onslaught on her opponent. Kore had her backing up, disarmed of her scimitars, felled to the ground and pinned, all within forty minutes. Kore's aggression was at a very high level to begin with and seeing Administrator 'block hinge' Bonetti in the balconies did not improve her savage frame of mind.

"She's going to hurt someone." Blacklock muttered. "Shawn, pad-up, you're in there with her next. I'll sort out the overseers." Shawn was as close in ability and skill as there was to Kore and Blacklock knew that Kore needed to vent her temper and her frustration. Shawn nodded and went to put on his padded armour. "Bloody psycho she is. Aggravate her."

"Do what?" Shawn paused while buckling on his belt. "You jest? She'll peel my skin off!"

"You big fairy. She's had one match so she'll wear down. Spar with her and break her temper. She needs it out of her system and she's not going to kill one of her best friends, is she?"

"I admire your confidence in the situation." Shawn said dryly and headed for the tunnel that lead to the arena. Kore's first victim was on her way back to the cells and Shawn passed her.

"She's bloody nuts!" The woman cradled her broken forearm with her other hand. "Why the hell did they shove me in there with the champion when she's in a piss?"

"How insulted would you have been if she'd just toyed with you and strung you along, Tanya?" Shawn smiled at the woman and went to face Kore.

Creed watched Kore make very short work of a dark haired gladiator armed with two scimitars and had to fight with the urge to jump up and down cheering when she won. He recognised Shawn too and knew they were both Blacklock's fighters.

"Should be a good match." He observed to Lumni, who Ben had suggested accompany Creed on duty at the arena.

"Same trainer." Lumni was quite well clued up on the sport.

"Is that so?" Bonetti craned his skinny neck to look at Creed who didn't want to look at Bonetti at all. "Is that standard procedure? People have wagers on these matches, Creed. That reeks of set-ups and staged performances."

"They're gladiators, Sir, not Thespians. They don't 'put on' fights." Creed said as Kore almost knocked Shawn out with the hilt of her sword into his temple, as though to prove Creed's point. "Hell I don't think she's ever going to run out of steam today." Shawn had resorted to brute strength to try and overpower Kore and this was always a last option in Blacklock's school. "Oo! Look out! Mind the test ... ouch!" Shawn creased over as the edge of Kore's shield rammed into his testicles from behind. "Shit you think they'd have learned by now."

"Showboating." Bonetti spat. "This arena is a joke." He stood up and Creed pulled a face at Lumni,

thinking the Administrator was taking his leave. "Stay where you are!" He shouted at the two gladiators and Creed cursed and closed his eyes. Not again! "Stable beasts should stick together. Stand your ground together. Overseers! Release four competitors to face these two beasts!" The crowd erupted into cheers and applause and Creed looked at the Administrator in contempt.

Shawn looked furiously at Bonetti that turned to look at Kore, who was grinning viciously.

"Pissants!" She yelled.

"Kore this is your third fight in a row and I pressed your stamina just then, go on the defensive." Shawn adopted a stance.

"OK." Kore nodded, she rushed full tilt at the group of four. Shawn swore and cursed Kore and all her ancestors, before doing likewise, through lack of choice. Despite his efforts to take most of the attacks in place of his partner, Shawn couldn't communicate with Kore at all as sheer blind fury drove her to mount assault after assault on her opponents. He yelled out in sheer exasperation as he watched Kore slice dangerously close to one man's neck veins. Blacklock was right, she was going to hurt someone. Seriously hurt someone.

"Stay down you fool." He hissed at the injured man. "Believe me, now isn't the time to go for any heroics." The man flopped back to the ground and surrendered his part in the match to Shawn's pin. Kore didn't seem to be interested in pins, in fact she looked terrifyingly close to a death match result. "Kore! For shit's sake!" Shawn actually drove his elbow into Kore's chest to slow her charge. "Ease up! You cause a fatality and this place will be in uproar, you lunatic bitch!"

"Get out of my way Shawn!" Kore growled and side-slashed at another one of their opponents.

"You're proving his damned point! You're acting like an animal!" Shawn took a crunching blow from a hammer into the small of his back and Kore whirled round to equalise the situation. "Leo will be in that jail forever Kore and it'll be all your fault!" Kore hesitated as Shawn's words hit her like a slap. This lapse in focus was all the hammer-wielder needed and he swung a blow at Shawn's head that would definitely have ended his life. Kore threw her sword and watched as it plunged deep into the other man's thigh, sending him staggering to the ground.

"No fatalities." She said, ignoring the screams as she extracted her blade that had drove straight through her opponent's upper leg. "Pin him."

Ben and Rowan followed the jail guard down a dingy corridor that looked exactly like the arena tunnel. This tunnel didn't go from arena to cell, however, it went from jail-house office to cell.

"I didn't think he was going to let us in Sir." Rowan whispered. Captain Faux who was on duty at that time, had been under instruction not to permit anyone an audience with Leo except General Marx. Faust Cooper had turned up and threatened to have the Captain scrubbing out middens for the next ten years if he didn't go for a walk around the yard a few times. It had never ceased to amaze Ben the amount of respect and authority that Faust still commanded, even though he'd been retired for five years. He had no doubt whatsoever, and nor did Faux, that Faust could indeed, have the Captain on midden duty ... somehow.

"Oh there aren't many tangle with Faust." Ben said vaguely. "Damn, how far into the dungeons have they hidden the man?" They turned another corner and two more guards were sitting at a wooden table outside a barred cell, playing cards. "Isn't this a bit ... archaic? These cells haven't been used for decades."

“He wasn't down here originally, Sir.” The guard who was leading them informed Ben. “He was up in the standard cells. I came on duty and found orders to move him here, that's all I know.” Ben just nodded and walked towards the cell. Re-securing the Pit, re-opening the dungeon cells, what next? “Cadets Lomax and Cassius, Sir.” the two card players got to their feet and their colleague headed back to the jail-house.

“He's asleep Sir.” Lomax informed Ben. “Not before time either. He's been awake longer than is natural for a man.”

“Keep it up Lomax and I'm sure Marx will add sorcery to his charge list.” Ben said nastily. He peered into the stone cell and saw a figure covered up with a coarse blanket on a thin wooden pallet. “This is damned well inhumane.” He said angrily. “I'll have him moved back up to the standard area, Rowan, don't tell Kore he's down here.”

“Kore?” Leo said groggily and struggled to a sitting position.

“Shit!” Ben blinked at Leo in astonishment. Even though he'd been told and better told of the twins' likeness, it was still dumbfounding to see first hand, especially after ten years. It was more than the likeness that produced Ben's reaction, however. This man was sick and any fool could see it. His face was ashen and his blue eyes were dull and sunken and although Ben had no idea of his natural build, he was still certain that Leo had suffered weight loss. “Cadet Lomax! Get Physician Sillix here to see this man, and do it now.” Ben was livid.

“Sir, I believe he's had a physician's examination on admittance.” Lomax said. Ben spun round and glared holes through the Cadet.

“I don't care if he's had divine intervention!” He shouted. “He has pneumonia! Are you blind? Believe me, if he gets any worse I'll head the procedural myself and hammer the pair of you negligence.” Ben growled in Lomax's face and the Cadet nodded and hurried off up the corridor. “Cassius, open the gate please.”

“I can't do that Sir, he's a class one prisoner.” Cassius shifted to stand behind the card table when he saw the thunderous look on Ben's face. Class one prisoners were violent, and often deranged, criminals, warranting the utmost security measures.

“The only way he could possibly harm me is by sneezing on me and passing on his sickness. Open that gate or I'll make you eat it.” Ben said patiently. “Thank you.” He smiled falsely as Cassius handed him the cell key.

“You have Kore?” Leo was running a horrendous temperature, Ben didn't need a physician to tell him that.

“Not with me, no, but I spoke with her last night, Leo.” Ben sat on the edge on the wooden bunk. “She's got quite a few people working together to sort all this out. She loves you very much Leo.” Leo seemed to relax slightly and the tears came at the same time as a weak smile.

“I know who you are.” He said with his eyes closed. “Captain Soldier.”

“That's right.” Ben was very surprised that Leo remembered. “General Soldier now though, as you can tell by my weight-throwing out there. Ben Astrella and you will never know how overwhelmed I am to discover you and Kore again after all these years. Me and a few others, Faust Cooper included.”

"I remember him too." Leo broke out into a hacking fit of coughs that rattled through his chest. "I want my sister." He said weakly.

"I know, and you're ill. Physician Sillix is on his way, you can't stay in this hole."

"I didn't do anything. No matter how sick I get and no matter what they threaten to do to Kore, I can't admit to something I haven't done when it affects another person too."

"Of course not." Ben agreed. "There aren't many people out there who can do anything to Kore and that's when she's on her own." Ben smiled and Leo laughed. "She has friends with her too, Leo, so do you."

"I've never even met the Lady, you know that? I've seen her twice and both those occasions were public events. What in black buggery are they trying to do to her?" Leo shook his head and Ben looked at him in surprise. "Oh I know all this was just a set-up to rile Kore and the gladiators into a frenzy but did anyone think about Lady Toller? She may not be locked up in jail but she's been unofficially 'charged' with the same thing I have, obviously."

"Well I believe she's still in her quarters at the Villa." Ben really didn't know what to say. Leo was right, not one person had given a single thought to what this was doing to the reputation, standing, and character of a completely innocent woman, a very intelligent and decent woman at that. "I'll make it my business to enquire into her welfare, personally if possible." Ben felt very ashamed of himself, and the rest of their supporters for being so inconsiderate. "I think Kore likes her. Apparently they spent an evening together at Lady Toller's birthday celebrations."

"I figured out that's where she'd gone. Kore and Lady Toller?" Leo tried to laugh again and fell into another coughing fit. "Now there's a friendship I'd like to see in action. Do you know you're one of the reasons she's so tough?"

"I am?" Ben asked in surprise.

"She used to wait at the gates for you coming back. I told her that if you did come back you'd think she was a little fluff-ball for sitting crying all night. As you can imagine, she didn't like that image at all." Leo smiled and Ben was filled with guilt yet again. "Ah I know you couldn't come back, don't look like that. Kore knows too. We were only kids though. How old would you say Blacklock was?"

"Er ... I think I know what you're going to tell me." Ben said awkwardly. "He's a lot older than twenty and if Kore had waited until she was as old as him to find me, then I'd be grey and senile by then." Leo started to laugh. "You're a credit to each other, absolutely remarkable. You both have so much to be proud of, for yourselves and for one another." Ben said in admiration.

Footsteps echoing down the corridor heralded the return of Lomax with Physician Sillix.

"I hope you're going to clear this up with General Marx, Sir." Lomax said to Ben, chewing his bottom lip.

"It'll all be reported and signed, yes." Ben said, watching the physician begin to look over Leo. "Do you know who he is?" Ben wondered just how far Kore's popularity had spread, and thus Leo's.

"Kore Blacklock's brother." Lomax answered promptly and Ben nodded. Far enough. "I think they

got the genders wrong somewhere. She's out there felling armed fighters and he's in here snivelling like a baby for his sister.” Ben pinned Lomax against the wall with his elbow.

“You really are stupid aren't you? He's delirious, you fool!” Ben said through gritted teeth. “He was arrested and brought here with no time to tell the only family he has, his sister. Has it ever occurred to you that he's worried about her? No, I dare say it hasn't. For your information, she's pretty 'snivelly' herself.” He released Lomax who looked very pissed off indeed.

“Sir with all respect, I've heard of the depravities he's conducted with a married woman and in no way does a man like that deserve anyone's concern and sympathy.” Ben grabbed Lomax by the tunic and dragged him along the corridor and round the corner.

“Heard from who?” Ben growled quietly and Lomax swallowed hard. “You either cough up who, and what, or I'll presume you are the origin and I'll hit you with unfounded discrediting while the victim is unable to defend himself, that is, he's ill and he's in bloody jail.” Ben was a walking law book, something that had come in very useful during his career. His reputation for this proceeded him and this was useful in itself, seeing as he could make up a few by-laws and no one ever presumed they were anything other than legal.

“I was present when General Marx questioned him, Sir. I heard what he said.” Lomax said defensively. “I certainly didn't originate anything!” Ben glanced to his left to make sure that Rowan was hearing this, and if Rowan could, so could Cassius, hopefully the physician too. “First off she's married, she had no business being in his rooms unescorted at all, let alone a librarian in her chambers and the Governmental Villa!” Lomax said in outrage. “Unnatural acts were mentioned a few times, Sir.”

“By whom?” Ben asked flatly.

“Well Leo would hardly bring it up would he?” Lomax said sarcastically but Ben let it go. “General Marx asked him if he had a preference for ... for ... well, an unnatural act, Sir.”

“I promise you I won't get outraged and start screaming the place down in horror.” Ben sighed.

“Very well Sir. General Marx had reason to believe that Leo had been participating in a number of unsavoury acts involving unconventional orifices.” Lomax was only slightly less vague but Ben eventually got the picture of who's orifices and which orifices and what was 'unnaturally' placed into them. “Totally obscene, Sir, I'm sorry but you did ask.”

“And Leo mentioned this too?” Ben asked, and Lomax frowned in concentration. “Did you hear Leo discussing this or admitting it to General Marx?”

“Well no Sir, but he wouldn't, would he? It's scandalous.” Lomax sniffed.

“As it's meant to be.” Ben said darkly. “Leo just sat there and accepted all that did he?”

“Oh no Sir, in fact he got very agitated and quite nasty. That didn't help him one little bit! The General had cause to bind his hands on that occasion.” Ben only just held his temper. Leo had been verbally tortured, probably for hours at a time and that was totally unacceptable by most standards, except for Marx's, apparently.

“When the General said he had reason to believe all this, did he say what his reasons were?”

“Not outright Sir, but it'll have been the clothes and the personal effects.” Lomax shrugged. In other words, nothing at all apart from Marx's hounding harassment. He was relying on Leo's isolation in the jail and the inaccessibility to him by other Military officers, to wear the man down. It would work too if Leo was kept here in these conditions, he was already ill from it.

“Pneumonia, fever, slight delirium, the start of muscle deterioration, leading to spasms which could worsen in these conditions because his lungs are affected.” Physician Sillix gave his report to Ben, who was the senior officer present. Ben decided not to tell him that he wasn't actually on duty there, as he watched him put his name to the reports.

“Have you conducted any medical examinations on Lady Toller, Physician Sillix?” Ben asked quietly, out of ear-shot of the rest of the men, out of respect for the lady.

“No, I have not.” Sillix answered promptly.

“You have not?” Ben feigned surprise. “I would have thought such charges would warrant a physician's backing, at least. Is it possible that Physician Barnabus could have been asked?”

“Absolutely not!” Sillix replied hotly. “The man's senile and only good for poultices. Lady Toller would refuse his services, General, I'm quite certain of that.” He seemed rather put out that he hadn't been called in on this. “I think we can safely assume that no physician's report has been issued regarding Lady Toller.” He sniffed.

“I don't know what they're thinking of by not asking you.” Ben shook his head. “You're the main physician in all four Quarters and obviously the most respected and experienced.”

“Naturally.” Sillix agreed aloofly. “Experienced enough to know that that man will deteriorate rapidly if he is not housed elsewhere.” He grabbed his report to make an amendment to it and Ben smiled in satisfaction. “This place is falling apart even in the most up to date areas. I wouldn't be doing my sworn duty as a man of medicine if ignored such conditions.”

“Thank you, Physician Sillix.” Ben accepted the physician's amended, and very pleasing report. Leo was to be released into the Quarter Three infirmary, complete with double guards, just as he had now. General Louis Marx no longer had the monopoly on visits to Leo.

Marx was absolutely furious when he came on duty, to the point of hot tears of pure rage. Predictably, he'd ran straight to Bonetti's offices and Bonetti had sent word for Governor Toller.

“That was my prisoner!” Marx ranted. “Apprehended according to the laws and regulations of the Military! Ben Astrella had no authority whatsoever to counteract my orders. The prisoner had already undergone a thorough, physician's examination on detention, as is required. Astrella had no right to call in a second opinion without authorisation.” He pointed to Physician Barnabus' admission report that stated that Leo was in first class health, albeit with a slight defect in his left eye.

“Why was he transferred to the cellars?” Governor Toller asked.

“I can't believe you're asking that!” Marx exploded.

“Sir.” Toller barked a reminder of who exactly the Captain was speaking to.

“I beg your pardon, Sir.” Marx fawned. “He became violent on questioning. Sir if you just give me the authority I need to override Astrella then we need trouble you no more on this issue. I'm sure it's

quite distressing for you, given the circumstances.” Toller couldn't have looked less distressed if he'd been comatose. He'd actually been quite amused when this had first come to light and he felt a previously unknown spark of kinship with his wife. This had soon turned to irritation when Ursus strenuously and persistently denied any knowledge of the whole thing. Toller honestly couldn't see why she was so worked up about it. So she got herself a bit of company for the night? Or a few nights? What was the problem? Toller himself, had done that for years. He was quite happy to 'entertain' Ursus with the gory details and simply couldn't understand why she wouldn't share this with him. He'd offered to set Leo up in the government, and house him in a wing of the Villa but Ursus still refused to admit she'd had any part at all in the affair. She'd made the mistake of expressing the desire to see the gladiator girl, Kore. Then Toller had gone on the defensive and restricted his wife to her rooms, under watch. If she wanted herself a man, then one from a different origin would be insisted on in the future, not a reformed gladiator.

The heated party was interrupted a very young Cadet who looked terrified after hearing the Governor and General Marx's raised voices. He peeped round the door when he was roared at to enter and introduced himself as Cadet Dom Roscus.

“Sirs.” He coughed nervously. “I have a formal, signed report to deliver. I was told it's urgent and relevant.” He held out the sheets and Governor Toller snatched them from Dom's hand in annoyance. “What in hell's name is this?” He yelled at the Cadet. “Who requested this?” He thrust the papers under Dom's nose and the poor man looked close to tears. “It looks like you might get the authority you just asked for Marx. I'll have Astrella out-posted for ...”

“Your wife sent me Sir!” Dom squeaked and Toller went purple. “I ... I'm on duty outside your wife's rooms Sir.”

“So I suggest you get back there!” Toller bellowed. “Tell my wife I've received this ... this ... shit ... and that I'll deal with her later. Get out!” Dom gratefully did so, very quickly. Toller sat and fumed and Marx and Bonetti glanced nervously at each other. “Has the librarian admitted anything at all?” Toller asked eventually and Marx shook his head. “Why do you think that is, Marx?”

“Well I presume it's largely to do with the nature of the issue and, of course, the people involved.” Marx said cautiously.

“And maybe because hasn't damned well done anything?” Toller erupted.

“Sir I can assure ...”

“No you cannot! You blundering imbecile! Not only do you get an incompetent drunk like Barnabus as physician, you don't even ensure that he does a complete job! My wife did not receive a physician's examination? You tell me this man and her have been engaging in every damned thing from buggery to mutual pain games yet she wasn't attended to by a man of medicine?! Why in shit's name not?” Toller roared loud enough to be heard all over the city.

“Sir we would never assume to take such a liberty with the Governor's wife!” Marx protested. “Lady Toller shouldn't have had to undergo such an ordeal at the hands of Barnabus.”

“How about Sillix? You addle headed streak of horse-piss, Marx, he's the governmental physician!” Toller threw the report at Marx. “There isn't a mark on her, she's as fresh as the dawn. She has not engaged in any sort of unnatural practices with this man, or any man! In fact, if you read the hell-rotten report, you'll see she hasn't engaged in any natural ones either! You damned fool.” Marx felt his colour drain as he read the report, signed by the most respected physician in Azoria. Lady Ursus Toller was intact, completely.

“Th ... this is outrageous Sir.” Marx blurted. “There's only one person who would insist on this procedure, he did the exact same thing regarding my prisoner. This isn't worth the paper it's written on because Lady Toller will have told Sillix nothing. Astrella needs jailed for insisting that the lady be questioned in this way.” Marx said firmly.

“She wasn't just questioned.” Toller snarled. “Read the bloody thing! The last page is signed by Lady Toller herself stating that her examination was physical, and by her own request. She called in Sillux, not Astrella! Why, is what I want to know. If that report has to be released to tribunals then I'll be recognised as not willing to produce a successor to my position. Are you with me?” Toller banged his hands on Bonetti's desk. “My marriage will be annulled but far worse than that, Ursus will walk away with over three quarters of my estate. Half by legal entitlement and half again because the land I own used to belong to her drunk of a father.” He narrowed his eyes at Marx. “If that happens, I swear by all that I've ever owned in my life, that I'll see you begging on the streets of Killian within six months. That blasted librarian hasn't confessed to damn all and he's unlikely to now. You stuffed up Marx, fix it.” Toller stormed from office and slammed the door.

Marx collapsed heavily into a chair and Bonetti's head reeled. The only thing Marx had to do just then, was to say that Bonetti had authorised the investigations and arrest, and Bonetti would have been in very hot water. Luckily for Bonetti, he hadn't.

“You'll have to release the librarian Marx.” Bonetti stated the obvious. “This can't go to tribunal with so many irregularities, especially when Lady Toller herself is obviously willing to participate in the procedure.”

“Why?” Marx sobbed. “She's never participated in bugger all in all her poxy life! Why now?”

“May I remind you of who you are speaking, and in front of whom? Yes this is disastrous but we will not resort to such non-constructive language. Do I make myself clear?” Bonetti said and Marx nodded weakly. “Is there much chance of the librarian kicking up a fuss if he's freed?”

“Him, I'm not sure. His guttersnipe sister, almost certain. The shit is though, she now has enough help to do it legally and not go on the rampage as she would have not too long ago. I'd think nothing of naming names Sir, but I've nothing concrete.”

“And General Astrella will tie you in legal knots.” Bonetti reminded Marx. “Think.” He pursed his lips and rested his chin on his fingertips. Even though this had gone pathetically wrong, Bonetti still had his 'situation'. The type of situation really didn't matter as long as there was a way he could be seen to be rectifying it. The rabble in the Pit were now upset, as they were intended to be originally. If the librarian was released, then his sister would make waves, as she was intended to do originally. Leo's arrest had actually served it's purpose, but the way it was so incompetently handled, plus Lady Toller's unexpected contributions and interest meant that more than just the gladiators were alerted. Ben Astrella certainly had his arm in it, and Vespus Creed, both very reputable Military men that couldn't be just relocated without causing more unwanted attention. If this went to tribunal then the whole Military, apart from the librarian's party, would be shot down. “See to the librarian's release, Marx, you have very little choice. As for the 'evidence' you collected, the anarchistic Cadets from the Fourth Quarter who sought to malign the Governor's family by contriving such scenes, will be posted to one of the industrial communities on Plaus.” Bonetti sighed. “Far from ideal, but we are in a crisis of your making, Marx. Dismissed.” Marx glowered at the Administrator for a while before barging out of the office.

Ursus was trying so hard not to cower in front of her husband as he paced her rooms, shouting and

raving. Spence had never been a violent man in all the time they'd been married, but there again, his estate had never been in serious jeopardy. It sickened Ursus the way 'settlements' were reached regarding marriage dissolutions. Spence's intolerable behaviour over the years was only that. Intolerable. Had Ursus left him for that reason, then she'd have left penniless, homeless and ultimately discredited because Spence would still be the Governor and completely unaffected. If Ursus left him because of his lack of interest in the physical aspect of their marriage, she'd be a free woman of means just because Spence would be tainted by the situation and another grabbing official would be hovering around somewhere to taint him further. No one puts wagers on a loser.

“How dare you undertake such an action without my permission?!” Toller pointed at his wife.

“How dare you disbelieve me in the first place?” Ursus shouted back and for the first time in their marriage, Spence hit her. She clutched her stinging cheek and tasted blood in her mouth. “I haven't finished!” She screamed as Toller turned to leave. “You sat there on your white, flabby arse and simply believed in those accusations just because it turned you on! You let all those people, all those soldiers, believe I was an adulteress and it bothered you not one bit about the unwarranted shame I endured. Had I pleaded with you on my hands and knees for a physician's proof, you'd have laughed at me. I did it to clear my own name, Spence. Me. Ursus, remember? I'm not a governmental accessory and I'm no man's scape goat!”

“Do you know that your stupidity has affected other people? Do you realise others are affected by Sillix's busy-bodding at your request?”

“Yes.” Ursus nodded. “It shows what a pack of liars this Military is ... don't you dare raise your hand to me again Spence Toller! It also rubbishes those disgusting charges you brought against a man who's a complete stranger to me, as well as innocent, and it saves you a full blown gladiatorial uprising when his sister demands a few answers! Use your damned brain instead of your penis for once!” Ursus screeched, not caring if the outside guards could hear or not. “You're standing there crying over potential loss of your estate, you arrogant bastard! If those fighters in the Pit rise against you, you'll have no estate left to cry over. Get out of my rooms Spence or believe me, I'll insist on exercising my right as a governmental spouse and release all that I know as a public declaration.” Ursus turned her back on her husband and let the tears flow as she looked out of her window.

“You may not have that right for much longer.” Toller snarled darkly.

“Then I'd be free to declare it where, when, and how, I damned well pleased. I said get out.” Ursus snapped savagely. Toller actually damaged the structural work with the force at which he slammed the door.

Chapter 13

Cadet Lumni ran in sheer panic and stood behind a tall locker in the barracks as a leather-clad woman, fully armed with a short-sword, came racing into the room.

“Bah!” Kore flung up her arms. “Where in blue hell is everyone? Hey! Yes you. Is General Astrella in here?” Kore pointed to a door whilst heading towards it.

“Oi!” Lumni ran and stood in-front of it. “No he's not but you can't just barge in anyway. How did you get in here?”

“My friend, Jyp, made me a gate in your fence.” Kore grinned. “Come on Cadet ...”

“Lumni. He isn't in there! Come on, out of it. Not even gladiator champions are allowed in there just as they please.”

“Ah! You know me?” Kore's ego started to inflate.

“I saw you going lunatic in the arena yesterday.” Lumni said. “A bit uncontrolled for you, I thought.”

“It was.” Kore admitted. “Look, I want to see Ben, it's very important.” Kore bounced up and down like a hyperactive child.

“Ben?” Lumni rose his eyebrows at such blatant familiarity. “Well he's not in! He disappeared a few hours ago to see Captain Creed. You know? Vespus?” He said sarcastically.

“Yes I know Vespus too.” Kore smirked. “Where?”

“Well Captain Creed was up at the Villa but I don't know if they'd arranged a meeting elsewhere.” Lumni shrugged. “They usually come back here, everyone does.” He nodded to the General's rooms. “None of the other Generals do that, you know, only General Astrella. The rest of them think they're too good to speak to us peasants in their own rooms.”

“Such a nice man. Villa, yes? Thank you Lumni.” Kore turned to leave.

“I'll come with you. I was expecting him back here too and he hasn't arrived. I need my duty sheets signed before I can go off my shift.” Lumni grabbed his papers and followed Kore.

Ursus Toller walked alongside Cadet Roscus, through the governmental Villa that was her home, and had become her prison.

“I can't thank you enough for this, Cadet Roscus.” Ursus whispered. “If you want to return to your post now and go along with my original suggestion, then that would be fine too.”

“Just to raise the alarm that you were gone? No ma'am, not the mood the generals and the Governor

are in. I'd be on Killian in no time. It's OK, I swear. No one knows I'm off duty because no one takes a lot of notice of me." Dom shrugged. He'd been about to finish his shift when Lady Toller had asked him into her chambers and implored him for help in exiting the Villa for a while. Dom had suggested that they simply walked out of it. Two other guards had taken over the watch and all Lady Toller had to tell them was that she had an appointment. That was it. It wouldn't be possible, just now, for her to walk around unsupervised, and thanks to Dom Roscus, she wasn't.

"I'm so sorry you got the foul end of my ... of the Governor's temper earlier, I knew he wouldn't be happy. I was desperate to have those papers delivered while the Administrator and the General were there, and you were my only hope. Thank you Cadet Roscus." Ursus smiled and Dom got flustered and went red. They were now out of the Villa and its grounds and not one single person had attempted to stop them. "Arseholes expect me to just sit there weeping my time away." Ursus muttered then noticed the look on Dom's face at her colourful language. "Nice talk for a Lady eh?" She winked, and reverted to her pre-Toller accent, which was very slightly rural. Dom started to laugh. "Right! I'm off to the brothel."

"The ... the ... the where?" Dom spluttered.

"I need to be de-lady'd." Ursus laughed. "Oh not in that way, calm down. I need a change of clothes from this billowing affair to street clothes, that's all. I'll look a tad silly traipsing about in a silk and gold gown."

"Quite, ma'am. You'd be lucky to be still wearing in within ten minutes with some of reprobates out here." Dom observed. "They'd go with the hair off your head if it even looked gold." He'd walked her to the brothel and didn't look to sure about leaving a titled Lady to such a place. "Stuff it, we can't have you just striding in there ma'am, everyone and their aunt fannies will know within minutes. If you stay in the lobby here, out of sight, I'll go ask for Jasmine, she's sound is Jasmine." Dom nodded and left Lady Toller out of sight, temporarily. Faust almost stood on her as he walked down the stairs, tugging down his tunic.

"Pardon me ... eeeek! Lady Toller?" He just looked at the woman in sheer shock. What the hell was she doing in the whorehouse? "Are you ... lost?"

"Just waiting to see Jasmine." Ursus smiled. "Enjoying your retirement, General Cooper?"

"Definitely. Pardon my saying, Lady Toller, but are you sure you have the correct Jasmine?" Faust glanced upstairs towards the room he'd just left.

"Hell." Dom came through the door, with the owner of the place who was to call Jasmine. "Well out of sight ma'am." He muttered. "General Faust." Dom nodded politely.

"Manage OK Dom?" Ursus asked and Faust almost fell over. What was going on here?

"Jasmine! Client for you!" 'Lady' Blanche yelled up the stairs. Jasmine appeared, shouted 'hello' to Dom and Dom cringed visibly. When he did open one eye, he saw Faust Cooper glaring at him for an explanation. He must have thought Dom had invited Lady Toller here.

"Er ... I knew this was a bad idea." He said weakly.

"Jasmine, may we come up please?" Lady Toller removed her hood and Jasmine's eyes opened almost as wide as her mouth. "General Cooper, please don't jump to conclusions and don't presume Cadet Roscus is at fault in any way. He isn't, quite the opposite in fact." Dom nodded and Faust tried to shake his head and nod at the same time.

“Lady Toller, all I'm concerned about is your welfare.” Faust said truthfully. “While it's true that I'm now retired, I'm still up to date with current affairs.” He said meaningfully and paused to let Lady Toller digest his meaning. This wasn't right at all and Faust knew it. Something had developed regarding Leo, the person that was accused of seducing the very lady standing in front of him, in a place she would never usually visit. “I never jump to conclusions regarding those either.” Ursus lowered her eyes and suddenly felt very drained, and very lost, and very confused. She'd stood up to Spence for the first time ever, over the most obscene lie ever. Now the rage had past, the shock and impact of that argument started to set in. She wouldn't be Lady Toller before much longer and Spence would devise a way to drag her through the mud in the process. She wanted out before he had the chance, but didn't know how, nor who to go to. She had no friends and no family and was so out of touch with society that she no longer knew who ran what, and in what manner. Faust had been there forever. He'd been there at Ursus' wedding celebrations and well before that too. He'd told her he knew her father, albeit in a professional capacity, that being Faust arresting him for disorderly conduct while drunk. “Jasmine, are you OK to receive us in your rooms?” Faust took Lady Toller's elbow when he saw her distress.

“All of you?” Jasmine blinked in shock. “Yes, yes of course I am. Are you OK ma'am?” She said in concern. “Dom, will you go and get some wine from Lady Blanche, please?” Jasmine took out a pouch of coins from the frills of her skirts. “Please sit down Lady Toller.” Jasmine even offered to leave her own chambers seeing as this couldn't possibly have anything to do with someone like her. Ursus refused to have the girl leave and told her she'd pay for her time, in person. She told Faust her need for street clothes, then began her explanation by saying she was on her way to the infirmary to see Leo. Faust was more than surprised, as was Jasmine. News of the 'scandal' had even hit the brothel.

“I'm trusting that you believe those disgusting accusations to be totally false?” Ursus said angrily and the two men and Jasmine all nodded. “Good. I now feel reassured enough to tell you that the charges against Leo will be very shortly dropped, if they haven't been already. I ... well I took it upon myself to refute the lies inarguably.”

“You did?” Faust was very, very impressed. He'd always know Ursus Toller, or Vinter, was a respectable and dignified woman but it was always her resigned acceptance of situations, and her overly placid nature that reduced her to the ranks of the insipid and unheeded. “That's remarkable, Lady Toller.” He enthused. “How?”

“Ursus, please.” Ursus said. “How? Er ... well I just did. OK?”

“OK by me.” Faust shrugged and Jasmine kicked his shins. “Ouch! What? Oh! Oh I see. Ugh.” He coughed uncomfortably and scratched his nose when he caught on as to 'how'.

“I really do want to see Leo to tell him myself. He must think me an awful person to level such a horrible charge.” Ursus said miserably.

“Lady ... Ursus, Leo thinks nothing of the sort. I know this because I was in company with his sister and other supporters when it was discussed. We know how those arseho ... people work and we know to what lengths they'll go to to get their own way. They aren't above using pawns and we all know it, even Leo.” Faust said.

“So he doesn't think I made the complaint?” Ursus said in relief. “And Kore? She knows I'd never do that?”

"I think you'd know about it if Kore believed that." Faust said dryly. "She almost beheaded Creed. So you really do know one another? Kore did mention it, but you know her manner, she exaggerates it for show." He rolled his eyes.

"I only met her once but she's the most fantastic woman I've ever had the honour to keep company with." Ursus told Faust about her banquet, and also found herself telling him of Pape's revolting behaviour towards Kore. Faust took a deep breath, and a deep plunge, and told them all he knew regarding the situation regarding Kore, Leo and the attempted provocation of the gladiators. Ursus could be invaluable in the event that they tried anything like this again. She could single-handedly discredit it at its very source. Faust needed her to know that she could trust him. Ursus listened and nodded. She'd actually worked most of it out for herself. "Bonetti." Ursus pulled a face. "Waiting in the wings to trample Spence underfoot. Not that he doesn't deserve it. Azoria has been left too long with too many of its own devices, Faust. This Government did a fine job in the beginning, as you know, you were part of the original Military. Because of that original ability, it was presumed after a while, that they were quite efficient and capable of running Azoria by themselves and that's just what they were allowed to do. Tibrae which is the closest citadel, had no need to think that it need sit in Azoria's lap and hold its hand, nor did the rest of Plaus. The Government took advantage of that, Faust. They saw the other nations' trust in their ability and they abused it. Now it's got to the stage where issues can be glossed over while anyone else is on the scene and those others have no reason to suspect there are issues."

"You're absolutely right." Faust said in admiration. A female politician? There again, if Ursus Toller hadn't been in a position to hear all matters political, then no one had. She'd spent all her adult life surrounded by it. "I need to let Kore know of Leo's pending release, if she doesn't know already."

"I don't think she can know, Faust. No one can, yet." Ursus stood up and accepted a change of clothes from Jasmine.

"You'd be surprised at what Kore gets to know and via what channels." Faust told her.

Kore was darting towards the Villa at such a pace that Lumni had to trot to keep up with her.

"So yes! I do think the world of him!" She prattled on. "I'll nominate him for deity status when I'm Governor. I need to see Lady Toller too sometime. Any suggestions?"

"Yes, slow down, verbally and physically." Lumni panted. "So Blacklock told you Leo was to be released, yes? Sillix told Blacklock, is that right?" Kore nodded. "I'm sorry Kore but I can't think of a single reason why physician Sillix would impart such information to a gladiator trainer."

"Duh! Where do you think Blacklock gets all his medicine supplies? Brews them himself? He gets them from Sillix, Lumni!" Kore tutted. "Blacklock's probably said something pissy about the Military and Leo. Do you know they got that old fart Barnabus to examine my brother? Senile old coot needs buried. Ben realised that the barmy old fossil doesn't know his arse from his elbow hauled Sillix in! As though Sillix would only do half a job. Hellno. He off and looked up Lady Toller too, probably literally." Kore smirked and Lumni didn't look amused. "Leo wouldn't hurt anyone Lumni, and he didn't. I knew this charge was a load of shit and the fact that Lady Toller isn't damaged proves it. Ack! Is that Bownan and Rilix on the door?" Kore spied the two Cadets. "I don't think they like me anymore."

"Do you know all the Military?" Lumni asked in surprise.

"Only the ones worth knowing or the ones who've tried to arrest me." Kore smiled. "That's a compliment, if you think about it. Cadet Bowman! Nice to see you again. Your mother upped her

prices yet?” Kore bellowed up the driveway and Lumni almost fainted.

“Of course she has, years ago. What do you want this time?” Bowman snapped.

“The same as I did last time, sort of. I upped my prices too, this time I want to see General Astrella.” Kore nodded. “I’ll go wait in that little library place. Don’t worry, Lumni will come with me.” She swept past the two guards and Lumni stuck his nose up in the air as he did the same.

“Will Jyp stay out there in the garden?” Lumni still hadn’t recovered from Jyp’s appearance on the scene.

“Let’s hope so. We all can’t fit in here.” Kore opened the door to the side library where she’d been shown to the last time. There was a flash of movement and a bang of wood against wood. “What the hell was that?” Kore had her sword draw. “Did you see that?”

“No but I heard the bang. Rats maybe? Some sort of animal?” Lumni pushed past Kore to check the one small window that was in the room.

“There.” Kore pointed to one of the wooden panels on the lower half of the wall. “It vanished there. I’ll bet you Bowman’s mother’s earnings that’s hollow.” Lumni tapped the panel with his sword, then tapped the panel next to it. Kore was right. “OK I’ll move it, you impale anything that runs out.”

“For goodness sake.” Lumni said in exasperation. “Impale it? Might it not be a person, seeing as it opened a wall hatch and closed it after itself? I’ll open it, you subdue it. Please Kore, subdue, not mash.” Kore gave Lumni a dirty look and stood to one side, flat of her sword at the ready. Lumni snatched the panel out of its groove in the wall and the most alarming figure ran out and dashed behind a bookcase before Kore could even get a subduing chance.

“Shit! Who in hell was that?” She said in amazement. If it was fast enough to get past Kore, then it was very fast indeed. She was a trained gladiator! She lived on her reflexes! She pointed for Lumni to stand in front of the door then moved towards the bookcase. “You’re going to hurt yourself by flinging yourself around like that. My friend has the door secured and the window is locked. Come out so I can talk to you.” There was a rustling from behind the books. “I’ve sheathed my sword. I’m not a threat to you. Who are you?”

“You wouldn’t want to know.” A voice that was little more than a croaking whisper came from behind the bookcase. “The panel to the right of that one is also loose and that’s the one I was headed for. I missed the bastard because you made me jump! You freak.” Kore looked at Lumni in surprise. Freak? “I have an idea. If you and your boyfriend get in the first panel, the alcove one, then I can run into the correct one and we’ll say no more of it. What do you say?” Lumni had made his way to the panels and was now examining both of them. The first one was, indeed, an alcove and nothing more. The one to its right lead back into the darkness and was obviously a tunnel of some sort. Kore strode behind the bookcase at one side and the alcove dweller shot out of the other side Lumni leapt onto the moving target and immobilised it beyond a doubt.

“Who in black buggery are you? Let him up Lumni for shit’s sake. We don’t want lifted for crushing the old sod to death.” The ‘old sod’ was a man not much bigger than Kore and with hair that was as long as Kore’s, if not longer and it hung in thin grey strands. He was barefoot and dressed in worn, grey leggings and a black flannel blouson that was far too big for him.

“Honestly, you wouldn’t want to know.” The old man said sadly and sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor. “Please stay in front of the door Sir.” He turned his bright black eyes towards Lumni. “I

won't be in trouble for being here but there'll be a hell of a stink for you two if we get caught chatting.” Kore nodded at Lumni who stood in front of the door again. “He was right, I see.” The man looked at Kore. “Useless shit-head. I gave him money to keep you lot away from me. Why haven't you killed me?”

“Well I'm not in the habit of wandering around killing unarmed old men.” Kore scowled. “Who was right? What about? And who is 'my lot'? Or are you just rambling because you're senile?”

“Kore! Good grief.” Lumni heaved. “Been working on the people skills I see? Sir, we're here waiting for a General in the Military and I get the impression that you aren't meant to be in here.” He nodded at the now replaced panels. “Why would you think she was going to kill you? Has someone told you that she would? I'm also in the Military and if someone is using extortion on you to get money, then I can certainly deal with that for you.” The old man smiled and looked at his knees. “Playing on an elderly man's paranoia is a despicable thing to do.”

“Quite right.” The old man cocked his head to look at Lumni. “Something's not right here. Why are you her friend? She's a gladiator and you're a soldier. Why are you out strolling in the Ambassadorial Villa together?”

“Actually we're here to see my senior General but why wouldn't I be her friend?” Lumni asked warily. “For me to treat her in an unfriendly manner would be segregational in the extreme.”

“Hmm.” The old man frowned in concentration. “And they don't deserve to be segregated?”

“Certainly not.” Lumni said promptly. “No more than any other occupational sector in our society. Sir that's a very narrow minded and very antiquated attitude to have and one that isn't encouraged in the Military.”

“Well bugger me with a soup ladle.” The old man rubbed his eyes. “Now I don't know if I'm on my head or my arse. Who's in charge out there? Heads or Arses?”

“Arses for the biggest part.” Kore said flatly. “And you are proving yourself to be likewise with your bigoted words. If you're trying to get me in some sort of trouble in some way, then forget it. I'm going for Rilux to haul you off to the cells for being ... old.” Kore headed for the door and the old man started to laugh.

“You may as well girlie, they lock people up for far less and always have. You said I was paranoid.” He rolled his eyes at Lumni. “Are you so important that people try and get you in trouble? From what I've been told, that doesn't take much for the occupants of the Pit. That was a huge risk, by the way, unlocking that place. I could scarcely believe my ears when I was told.” Kore went for her sword but Lumni purposely blocked her way and hauled the old man to his feet.

“Listen to me.” Lumni said seriously. “I don't believe for one second that you're as loopy as you're trying to portray. Even if you were, trust me, talking in riddles and jumping from one thought to another wouldn't impress my friend here in the slightest. Now then.” Lumni released the man. “I'm Cadet Lumni, this is Kore and as you gathered, she's a gladiator so get over it. I have no idea where you've been for the last decade but the War is well and truly over. The Pit is no more than another area of the city and the gladiators are part of our ... workforce. The reason for my friend's paranoia has nothing to do with her status in the arena, but to certain rumours that have been perpetuated recently, that's all. Obviously nothing for you to concern yourself with. Now it's your turn. Where does that tunnel lead to? If you don't want to tell me, then I'm sure Cadet Bowman could go and find out for himself, thus depriving you of your secret access to this place.”

“No, don't do that!” The old man wailed. “OK! It goes to ... to ... Tibrae.” Lumni turned and reached for the door. “The Palace! Don't alert the guards, please, I beg you.” He grabbed Lumni's ankles.

“Get off me! For shit's sake, you silly old relic!” Lumni almost fell into the wall and Kore snorted a laugh. “The Palace? Don't be absurd man! That place has been a prison for fifteen years at least. Try again. Last chance.”

“Go yourself if you don't believe me. I'll stay here and keep the girlie company.” The old man leered and Kore glowered at him. “The Palace turned jail.” He sighed. “Home to one poor soul who was the victim of his own megalomania and delusion. Do you think he deserved locking away forever?”

“Yes.” Kore and Lumni said together.

“Me too. He was wrong and he knows it. He's had fifteen years to regret it too. Nothing can change that atrocity and the punishment was just. Is there a lot of difference between extorting money and possessions as happened then, to extorting money and possessions with the threat that not to do so would lead to a repeat of it?”

“Don't say I didn't try.” Lumni sighed. “Your riddles have become tiresome.”

“Hang on Lumni.” Kore walked over to stand in-front of the old man. “Someone is saying that there's a risk of another War but this time at the instigation of the gladiators. Is that right?” The old man sat back on the floor and started to cry. “Oh stop that!” Kore said irritably. He did so, straight away. “But if monetary funds are provided then this uprising can be contained?” The old man began plaiting a few strands of his wispy hair. “This monetary funding includes personal protection for you too, you told us that yourself. You claim to have come here via that tunnel from the Palace and you are completely out of touch with the times and with society. Lumni, this is Loram DeGaise.”

Chapter 14

Ursus approached Leo's bedside very nervously indeed. Her appearance had been changed as much as was cosmetically possible and she was now dressed in a similar, straight skirt and tunic that Jasmine wore. Faust had been right when he suggested that Jasmine accompany her to the infirmary, no one had looked twice at two women on their journey to, and entering, the building. This was probably due to the fact that Jasmine knew absolutely everyone! Men, women and children all seemed to know and like the young girl a great deal and at least a dozen had stopped to make friendly conversation with her on an array of subjects, thus taking any attention away from Ursus.

Leo spotted the two women and only recognised Jasmine at first. When he did actually recognise her companion he fell into a fit of coughs that threatened to totally invert his aching lungs altogether.

"I'm sorry." He wheezed, wiping his mouth on a cloth. "Please excuse all that."

"I didn't mean to give you such a shock." Ursus apologised. "I had to come and see you."

"I know." Leo said. "Lady Toller may I speak ... personally?" Jasmine took the hint and went to bring more water. "I presume you're here regarding my release?"

"I am yes. You know already?" Ursus was quite surprised.

"Marx came about an hour ago to tell me, or rather to howl at me in a temper fit. That well built woman over there is Sillix's assistant, she almost levelled him with a poultice." Leo smiled. "Lady Toller I hate to see such a fretful expression on such a beautiful face. I never thought, not for one instance, that any of this was done with your knowledge. You were a victim as much as I was and I'm desperately sorry for what you must have endured. I asked General Astrella to enquire into your well-being, nothing more." Leo chewed on his lip for a while. "Lady Toller, if I'm being presumptuous here, please forgive me, but I can only think of one thing that would cause Marx to drop this. His accusations have been refuted, with indisputable back-up." He watched as Lady Toller looked at the ground and her face coloured. "I thought so. I thank you with my life for enduring such an investigation. While I'm also grateful to General Astrella for bringing it about, I'm still not comfortable with it ever having been necessary."

"General Astrella? Oh no, you have that wrong Leo. I requested that Sillix make that report, not General Astrella. I wanted my own name cleared and no one seemed interested in that. I took the responsibility myself, for myself, knowing that would also exonerate you too. It was the right thing to do and my conscience would have killed me if I'd just sat there like one of Spence's accessories. Thank you for considering my well-being, Leo, you're the only one who has." Ursus tried to smile. "Is there anyone I can contact to let Kore know of your release? Obviously I can't go to the Pit."

"You've done more than enough already." Leo was completely astonished at the strength of Lady Toller's character. "No you certainly can't go to the Pit." Leo pulled a face and made Ursus laugh. "I believe you had the pleasure of my sister's company on your birthday?"

“Pleasure being the correct word.”

“Huh?” Leo wasn't expecting that one. “Are we talking about the same Kore? She borrowed that dress from Jasmine.” He whispered as Jasmine returned with a pitcher of water. “It's true! She has no feminine clothes at all. Thank you Jasmine.” Leo accepted his drink. “I can imagine this issue having quite affected your family.” He said to Ursus.

“I have no family.” She shrugged. “The one's I did have left me years ago when they farmed me off to Spence and Spence was no replacement. I have my own privacy at the Villa and Spence knows I have the means to ensure it stays private, for now. He won't bother me. Again, you're the only one who's been concerned, as was your sister when she witnessed Spence's conduct at the banquet. Odd don't you think? The only two sympathetic people are two that owe my social class no sympathy at all.”

“True, but a social class is group label, not an individual one. It would be a very narrow minded person who would disregard the fact that a social stratum is still made up of individual people. Anyway it's not your social class is it? It's Governor Toller's. You were married into it, hence, you're exempt.” Leo grinned, then fell prone to another barrage of coughs. “Damn.”

“Excuse me!” Physician Sillix was on his way over rather quickly.

“Oh no. What now?” Leo spluttered and tried to sit up.

“I'll have to ask you to leave.” The physician addressed Jasmine, who obediently stood up. “This is an infirmary, miss, I don't think the people here are well enough to ... sacred stars!” He eventually recognised Ursus. “I think I have the wrong idea here, or at least I hope I do.” Sillix said in bewilderment. “Are you OK, Lady Toller?”

“I'm fine thank you. Jasmine is a friend of mine and she's here with me in that capacity only.”

“Of course. I beg your pardon, miss. May I ask in what capacity you, yourself are here? Pardon my directness but the need for my recent involvement ...”

“It's fine physician Sillix, your trust and professionalism has not been compromised. This is the first time I've met Leo and I did so out of sympathy for a sickness that was caused by a situation contrived around him.” Ursus answered confidently. “A sickness that needs rest in order to heal, I think.” She turned her attention to Leo. “I'm so very pleased I came today. Obviously I can't guarantee that we'll meet again but if we do, I trust it'll be under more pleasant circumstances and when you're in good health.”

“Thank you. Your visit has meant a lot to me, as does your friendship. Jasmine, thank you for accompanying Lady Toller.” Leo said politely and the two women left the infirmary.

“Why would Lady Toller befriend someone like Jasmine?” Sillix said, staring at the closing door.

“Because she likes her? Please, physician Sillix, I know you're above snobbery and stereotypes. Lady Toller is also a good friend of my sister's and you can't tell me that they're alike in any way.” Leo laughed.

“She is? That could explain her personal request rather than a referral.” Sillix mused.

“With all respect physician Sillix, you're reading between lines when there is no need at all. Who was responsible for your decision to move me from that dungeon? No one. Exactly. It was your decision because it was the right thing to do, as well as being legally correct. She did it for herself, primarily, and to rectify a serious wrongdoing that affected other people.” Leo preached.

“I suppose so.” Sillix conceded. “I've never noticed Lady Toller being responsible for decision making in the past, that's all.”

“You've probably never noticed Lady Toller at all. I very much doubt her reputation's ever been assaulted like this in the past. The largest of sponges reaches it's absorption limit eventually. If you'll excuse me, physician Sillix, I feel exhausted and I still haven't got word to my sister regarding all this.”

“Maybe if she was somewhere more approachable than the Pit, it would be far easier. I'm sure she'll find out. Sleep well Leo.” Sillix nodded and left Leo to rest.

Ben propped his feet up on the table in the back room of Bard's Tavern. He'd been trying to reorder the rotas so either himself or Vespus Creed was in Quarter Three at all times, and he'd made a pretty good job of it too.

“Any authorisation stuff you might need urgently, you'll have to see Faust. I'll obviously arrange that with him.” Ben picked up his ale pot.

“How comes Faust still has so much influence?” Creed asked. “Not that I'm complaining.”

“He's been a soldier forever Vespus.” Ben shrugged. “I think it's a case of him knowing everything about everybody, warts and all. He's also a military genius. The governments from all over Plaus consult him on all manner of things. He's ten times more influential as an 'ordinary' citizen than he would be bound by the rules of a conventional position. Just suffice it to say that he makes a better friend than an enemy.”

“Absolutely.” Creed agreed. “So we need to check that Sillix's report has been heeded. It's revolting enough Leo's been set-up without the bastards trying to kill him too.”

“It better have been heeded. I can't see a way that Marx could dispute it, even though he'll have torn the place apart.” Ben smiled smugly.

“He really does irritate you doesn't he?” Creed laughed. “His principals and his methods do leave a lot to be desired, I agree.”

“Yes, he's a shit.” Ben said bluntly. “Faust should have had him exiled to the gem mines, Pape with him. If the twins hadn't made such a racket that day, they'd be dead. Pape had a sword to Leo's throat and Marx had made a grab for Kore. She bit him and booted his tackle up his back for his trouble.” Ben smiled as he remembered. “She was so frenzied that she attacked poor Rand with a rock, the fellow had dents for weeks.”

“Not changed much, has she?” Creed nodded. “She was two seconds from slitting my throat. My own fault I suppose, I should have known better than to try and use a gladiator as leverage.”

“You should have, yes, especially that one.” Ben smiled again.

“And you should know better than to try the charm with a gladiator, especially that one.” Creed laughed.

“Well I'd hardly try it with that Shawn fellow, would I? You must admit, Creed, she's fascinating. I've never met anyone like her.” Ben turned towards the door as it opened. “Good man Bard, two more ales.”

“Certainly Sir. I thought you'd be over at the Villa.” Bard picked up the two empty pots.

“Creed sorts all that out, he doesn't need me.” Ben took his feet off the table.

“Captain Creed receives your parents, Sir?” Bard asked in surprise. Not as surprised as Ben was, or Creed.

“My parents? My parents are here?” Ben jumped to his feet.

“They aren't due for a few weeks.” Creed Also stood up. “Damn, the place will be a shambles.”

“A good excuse for Marx to stir shit. Come on Vespus.” The men hurried out of the tavern.

Kore and Lumni heard voices outside of the library and Loram DeGaise rubbed his hands together and grinned.

“This should be good!”

“Get back in your hole.” Kore pushed him along with her foot. “They'll seal it off.” She threatened when the giddy old man started pouting. He squeaked then darted off into the tunnel hole, slamming the panel behind himself. “Bugger! What do we do now? Do we tell anyone?”

“How should I know?” Lumni stared at the panel in shock. “Loram DeGaise?”

“As daft as a loon.” Kore exhaled loudly. “Those shit-bags are getting funds to reseal the Pit from him, and finance another War, by telling him his mistakes are about to be repeated if he doesn't pay up. He can't just be allowed to crawl all over this place Lumni, dignitaries stay here! We'll tell ...”

“Are my parents here yet?” Ben's voice sounded from outside.

“Ben!” Kore's face lit up. “Ben!” She darted out of the library and ran at Ben with her arms flailing wildly.

“Shit! Kore! What are you ...” Kore leapt at the startled general and flung her arms round his neck.

“Thank you!” Kore whooped. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She planted a sloppy kiss on Ben's cheek.

“You're welcome.” Ben tried to focus on Kore's face at such close range. “May I ask for what? Just so I can do it again when we're in private?”

“Leo!” Kore hugged Ben again. “For getting him released from that midden! I knew you'd do it!”

“He's been released?” Ben blinked in surprise. “Kore I didn't do anything. Kore!” Ben prised the ecstatic gladiator from around his neck. “Kore I didn't even know about it. That's marvellous!” Ben went to return the hug and Kore ducked.

“You didn't get him out? Well who did?” Kore asked in confusion. “Blacklock told me and Sillix

told Blacklock and it was you who got Sillix in to Leo.”

“Because he has pneumonia Kore, and the prison conditions were worsening it.” Ben was also confused. “Leo wouldn't have been released just because he has pneumonia, just transferred to the infirmary. That's all I made sure of. Sillix's report on Leo wouldn't could ensure a rel ... by the stars!” Him and Kore just stared at one another in amazement. “Lady ...”

“Ben!” Everyone turned round to see one of the most beautiful women in existence. Ambassador Lily Astrella was as elven as Kore was and her eyes were an emerald green. There was no way at all she looked her true, fifty-two years and could easily pass for Ben's sister rather than his mother. “Ben?” Ben still had hold of Kore by her shoulders.

“Mother! Er ... yes, mother.” Ben let go of Kore and darted over to his parent instead. “Where's the old boy ... I mean, Lord Astrella?”

“Yapping with soldiers.” Lily rolled her eyes then let them come to rest on Kore. “Hello.”

“Good afternoon, Ambassador Astrella.” Kore said politely. “I really should be going, excuse me. Thank you for seeing me, General.” She smiled at Ben then nodded Lumni out of the door with her. “Shite! That place is supposed to be a secured building while the south wall is under repairs. Someone's going to get hauled over the spikes. Everyone and their cousin Patsy's are marauding about the ... Jyp! Oh crap!” They just caught a glimpse of the huge Nellatian's back as he tossed Rilux to one side and barged into the Villa. He'd obviously gotten worried at the length of time Kore was taking and given her last visit to the Villa, he was taking no chances. Kore sprinted back into the Villa to find Ben trying to explain why Jyp was clattering into every visible door whilst trying not to mention Kore, or Jyp's relationship to her.

“Little Lady!” Jyp bellowed when he spied Kore trying to re-exit the Villa. “Why for you taking a thousand years?” He asked sternly, frisking Kore for injuries.

“It's OK Jyp, it took longer that I thought it would.” Kore said nervously, glancing at the Astrella's. Ben had his face covered with his hand and his mother had her face covered by complete bewilderment.

“Oh?” Jyp stopped the frisk and followed Kore's glance. “Oh! Yes, Jyp seeing now.” Jyp winked at Ben and Kore wanted to run away and cry.

“No Jyp I don't think you do.” She tried to push Jyp out of the door, something just not possible with a Nellatian. “Jyp we shouldn't be here.” She snarled.

“Why for not?” Jyp said defensively. “Little Lady is every bits as good as this lady is too. Hers here first, missy.” Jyp said sternly to Ambassador Astrella. “Him is Little Lady's Captain Soldier from long time ago. You is very pretty though, you see him over there.” Jyp pointed to Creed who let out a mortified squeal.

“You think so?” Lily smirked and looked at Creed who tried to blend in with the wall. “Master Jyp, I'm Captain Soldier's mother.” Jyp thought about this very carefully, Kore and Ben both nodded furiously at him. “Oh look, here's his father too.” Lord Astrella stood in the doorway and filled it. He was a huge slab of a man and every part of him looked like a Lord.

“Dad! I ... I mean Lord ... oh sh ... ame.” Jyp beat him to it and stood in front of the confused Lord. “This is ...”

“Jyp Freeman.” Jyp announced grandly. “Ba orias ip Little Lady ercas, oraniton vivan. Ba hoj eres pinniad.” He gave a little bow and Kore and Ben just looked at each other.

“Admirable job you're doing too, young fellow.” Lord Astrella boomed and smiled widely at Jyp. “I hear the place is under repair?”

“Just the south wall.” Ben said quickly. “Hence the guard presence.” He nodded at Lumni.

“And the accompaniment for ... visitors.” Herz Astrella nodded at Jyp.

“Yes, quite.” Ben said and wondered what Jyp had said to his father in Nellatian. “I wasn't expecting you both for at least two weeks. Does the Governor know you're here?”

“He will by now.” Herz shrugged. “We aren't on business, we're just here to visit our son.” He clasped Ben about the shoulders. “Just as well we did.” He nodded at Kore.

“I have to go. Again.” Kore babbled. “I'm sorry for Jyp's confusion earlier, I should have kept him informed as to where I was. Good day Ambassador Astrella, Lord Astrella.” She smiled weakly. How embarrassing was all that! “Jyp, get out for shit's sake before they have us both in the asylum.” Kore and Jyp collided in the doorway a few times before actually succeeding in getting out, Ben glared Lumni into staying where he was and not adding to the buffoonery.

“Umm yes.” Ben looked at his parents. “Captain Creed, could you go and check alternate accommodation for Ambassador and Lord Astrella, please? I'm almost certain they'll be housed in the guest Villa but it wouldn't hurt to check.” Creed nodded and bounced off Administrator Bonetti just outside the door. “Oh good.” Ben muttered sarcastically and mentally thanked whoever was divinely overseeing this farce that Kore and Jyp had left.

“I wasn't informed of your arrival.” Bonetti simpered and Ben pulled a face behind his back in a very childish manner.

“Social visit.” Herz barked. Herz always barked, even when he was being friendly. “As you see, Ben was here to receive us.” Ben forced a smile as Bonetti turned to look at him.

“I hope those trespassers were dealt with General Astrella? This is a secure area.” Damn the man! He simply just had to say something!

“Not exactly trespassers, but yes, they were attended to.” Ben tried not to snap. “Can I help you with anything in particular, Administrator Bonetti? As my father just said, this is a social visit.”

“And a very welcome one. I took the liberty of reserving a seat for Lord Astrella in my balcony at the arena this evening.” Bonetti smiled smugly at the look on Ben's face. “I know you like a wager or two, Lord Astrella.”

“Absolutely!” Herz enthused. “Lady Astrella has just mentioned how weary this travelling makes her, so I'm sure she'd like me out of her way while she rests.”

“No she wouldn't!” Ben blurted. “I ... mean ... I'm sure she'd like a social visit to involve her too, and the arena isn't the place for my mother.” Ben crawled to his mother's natural maternal instincts and Lily 'awwed' and smiled at her son.

“You're right Ben, but I am tired. I'm not long back from a four day round trip to Canuska so part of

my being here is to rest up a bit. You go ahead with your father, don't worry about me.” Lily smiled and Ben nearly burst into tears. He hated the arena! He'd always managed to swap duty shifts whenever his father was due in the city purely to avoid attending the place with him. This occasion was doubly abhorrent because he'd actually know the main attraction, Kore.

“How fortuitous that you should have arranged this time off, General.” Bonetti smiled innocently. “I did notice that you'd swapped the rotas. How lucky!”

“Isn't it just?” Ben mumbled. “I'll escort you to the guest Villa. Thank you Administrator Bonetti, may all your wagers be productive.”

“And may Lady Luck light up your path.” Bonetti replied graciously.

“Up yours too. Shall we?” Ben held open the door for his parents.

Kore arrived at the infirmary like a whirlwind, only to be held up in the foyer. Leo heard his sister's approach before he saw it.

“Oh? Are you going to take it off me? Thought not. Come on Jyp.” Even though Kore was only five feet two, she seemed to fill the entire room as she made her entrance. Jyp almost did fill the entire room, literally. “Leo!” She ran at her brother and leapt on the bed to hug him, ignoring his coughing fit. “We have it all worked out, the bastards. Pfft! As though we're stupid enough to all get arrested for rioting, imbeciles. Well I thought Ben had Sillix give Lady Toller the once over but he didn't at all! She must have done that herself Leo! You'll never guess what jut happened! I went to Villa to thank Ben only it wasn't Ben after all, it was Ursus, but never mind. So there I was being exuberant and Lord and Astrella came in! They gave me a very funny look indeed, but she is so pretty Leo. Anyway, I excused myself and left but Jyp didn't know and barged in and started taking the place to bits looking for me! Then he assumed me and Ben were having it off somewhere and said something to Lord Astrella in Nellatian. What was that, by the way, Jyp? I had to all but haul him out before they locked us both up for insanity! You look like shit.”

“Are you going to pause for breath?” Leo laughed. “Yes it was Lady Toller who organised her own involvement. She's been to see me.”

“Has she? Ooo!” Kore was impressed. “She's nice isn't she? What the hell she wants with a greasy arsed old scrotum like Toller, I'll never know. Well Jyp?”

“Scuse me?”

“What did you say to Lord Astrella?”

“Just telling how Jyp owes life to Little Lady. Jyp tells him Jyp is protector. Umm In Nellatia is very similar words so him might may have got it wrong.” Jyp fiddled with the hem of Leo's blanket and Kore glared at him. “Protector is similar as chaperone in Nellatia words. Not Jyp's fault.”

“So you told him you were my chaperone?” Kore fell into fits of laughter. “Are you hell bent on getting me married into the Military, Jyp? First Creed, now Ben! What about Lumni? Hey Leo, he told Lady Astrella to go chat up Creed.”

“Was innocent mistake.” Jyp sniffed. “Lumni no good, him only pissy Cadet. 'Bassador Astrella far too pretty to be peoples' mothers.”

“She is too.” Kore agreed. “Leo do you know what they're trying to do out there?” She held her brother's hand. She'd missed him so much.

“Trying, Kore. That isn't the same as succeeding. Come on, I've never known you be defeatist in your life. Look at the help you've got onside! Now we can add Ursus Toller to our numbers. They'll never reseal the Pit, Kore, we won't let them.”

“Maybe if they had funding to orchestrate a revolt, then to quash it.” Kore said carefully.

“No nation would fund such a procedure and the Azorian people would never tolerate public money being spent by the government in such a way.” Leo stated.

“What about an Azorian person? Just one?”

“Oh Kore, the whole thing has you paranoid.” Leo smiled. “Just think about what you've just said, then estimate the cost of facilitating a war. It isn't the sort of sum one could pull out of one's savings.”

“It is if one happens to be the last ruling DeGaise of Azoria.” Kore said quietly and Leo thought he'd misheard her. Kore told Leo of her and Lumni's encounter with Loram DeGaise. “No one else knows and I trust Lumni. He's as loopy as a wet hen Leo, but all the arrogance and the megalomania has long been worn away. He's just a nutty old man with a vast amount of money. He thought I was giving Lumni one, Jyp, so that's another one to add to the collection.”

“So he's been roaming about in secret passages all this time?” Leo said in shock.

“Looks like it. The fact that he never drew attention to himself at all proves he's no longer a threat. He lost his power years ago and he completely accepts it, and regrets his actions. I don't know what to do about it. He doesn't deserve his liberty, nor do I think he wants it. He'd be slain in no time anyway. He's being used, Leo, and surely he can't deserve that either.”

“Devious bastards.” Leo said in amazement. “If a war ever did come about and it went sour, as it's bound to do, then they'd have a standing, irrefutable scapegoat. DeGaise funding a full scale war. If they pull this off while Toller's still in office, he'll be forced out of the government.”

“Bonetti.” Kore nodded. “With his pet arseholes, Marx and Pape. Do I tell Ben?”

“You trust him a great deal.” Leo smiled. “I don't think you've ever stopped trusting him for ten years Kore, have you? We'll have to tell someone, even if it's only for security reasons. Remember, Ben's parents usually stay in that building, as do many other visiting persons. Even if DeGaise is now harmless, it's still an unguarded entrance to a high security building.” He stated the obvious and Kore nodded. “Damn it I need out of this wretched place.”

“Like hell you do.” Kore said seriously. “We don't want your crappy lungs sprayed all over the place, you're a public health hazard.”

“You're all heart, dear sister.” Leo laughed.

“And I'm also late for my evening shift brawl.” Kore got to her feet.

“Business as usual.” Leo sighed. “Don't you argue with me, I'm five minutes older than you and the only reason you came here is because you miss my pre-match fussing.” He smiled. “Go and kick

some arse.” Kore kissed her brother, so did Jyp, and they left for the arena.

Chapter 15

Ben had an audience in the barracks as he threw his belongings into a pack. A social visit by his parents meant, out of courtesy and respect, a temporary move from the barracks to stay with them. Ben usually thoroughly enjoyed this privilege and valued every second he spent with his parents but he knew Bonetti, Marx, and company knew he was involved in the 'thing', as Rowan had put it. He really did need to be on the scene to handle any crap they decided to throw around, hence the rota rearrangements.

“Ben I know where the guest Villa is.” Creed reassured his General. “Anything happens and I'm straight up there to you.”

“Yes I know.” Ben sighed. “I didn't mean to suggest that you weren't capable Vespus. The issue of this treaty with Tibrae regarding Killian is bound to come up. As far as my parents know, all is well and flourishing here so they have no need to regard anything the government says with suspicion.”

“They won't believe any rubbish fed to them, Sir.” Rowan said. “They're professional people, as well as intelligent ones. There is no way at all that anyone could convince Lord and Lady Astrella that ousting the gladiators as neo-Athulan upstarts is a good idea.”

“I know that too. Any civil unrest here will put them in danger, firstly.” Ben fastened his tunic. “It'll also delay that treaty and further invalidate Toller's ability to do his job.”

“Well that won't take much. He's bloody useless.” Lumni observed.

“Yes he is.” Ben agreed. “But now isn't the time for his uselessness to be exploited and certainly not by a power-hungry warmonger like Bonetti. If anything kicks off now, my parents won't see any reasons not to back Bonetti. He's already trying to put me out of favour by trying to get me to react regarding Kore. I'm pretty sure my parents don't hold any bad feelings towards the gladiators but that's not to say they want half-gladiator grandchildren. Are you with me?” The men nodded. “He's making a situation that isn't there and will try and make it as sordid as he can. Sound familiar? Arsehole.”

“Just the shock value he's going for Ben.” Creed said. “As if the Lord and Ambassador would take the opinions of Bonetti as the whole truth when it comes to undermining their only son.”

“Shock will be enough if that pack of shits see it.” Ben stood and heaved a sigh. “I don't bloody well want to do this.” He referred to his outing to the arena. “I don't know what you two see in it.” He nodded to Creed and Lumni.

“If it's ran how it should be, it's a sport. The overseers do the job right Ben, there's no one killed and no one's there by force. They're athletes, and damned good ones too. The only time it ever gets out of hand is when pricks like Bonetti take over the show, shoving his nose in where he has no bloody clue.”

“Bonetti who's sent personal invitations to me and the old boy? I'd better get going.” Ben trudged towards the door. “So Kore never loses?”

“Not often.” Lumni said. “Tell Lord Astrella to bet on the time it takes her, not the actual win. She's so good that the odds are incredibly short. He'll make more if he goes for the time.”

“I'll tell him.” Ben said moodily and left to meet his father.

Bonetti, Marx, Pape and even Governor Toller were all out in pompous force at the arena and that sent Ben's mood even further down the midden. Herz Astrella frowned in irritation for the twentieth time as Administrator Bonetti sprang out of his seat, again, darted to the back of the balcony partition, then darted back. Ben had casually wandered back there to see what he was up to, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. That didn't allay his suspicions one little bit.

“Has he got rectal warts or something?” Herz's whisper was only marginally quieter than his usual booming tone. “If he knocks my dodgy knee once more I'll throw the fool over this balcony.”

“I think he's wet himself.” Ben glanced at Bonetti who was fidgeting in his seat. “Freak. So how much have you won?”

“Plenty.” Herz grinned at his son. “Splendid show this evening, I must say. I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I wagered on the time for the champion fight, like you said. I'm looking forward to it.”

“I'm pleased someone is.” Ben muttered. “Here we go.” The entire arena got to their feet and cheered loudly as Kore emerged from the tunnel. Even Ben was astonished at her popularity here, and also how very, very, tiny she looked down there. She was very, very tiny!

“Ooo! He has an escort? Hell he must be good.” Herz enthused.

“Umm dad? That is 'him'. That's the champion.” Ben couldn't help but smile at his father's expression. “Your wager's safe, believe it or not.”

“Well I'm tending towards the not looking at the size of her opponent.” Herz nodded to where a perfect male specimen with oiled black skin, towered over Kore with a short-sword and a shield in his hands. “Ben? Isn't that ...?” Ben nodded. “Your Villa guest was the arena champ?” He blurted and Ben could tell by Bonetti's face that he'd heard.

“Guest, dad, that's all.” Ben said quietly. He really didn't want to discuss Kore in this way in front of Bonetti, Toller and the crew. “Hell she's fast!” Ben flinched as Kore drew first blood with a nasty slash down her opponent's upper arm. Despite this, he was certainly making a very good match of it, and was obviously an astounding athlete. Kore received a sword hilt to her abdomen and a huge drop heel kick to her back that floored her completely. “No! I mean ... I mean ... no she's OK.” Ben glanced at his father who was cheering on his bet. “That's right Kore, defend until you get your wind back.” Ben urged from the balcony. “Good girl. Knees, go on!” As if by command, Kore rammed her shield into the man's knees and he stumbled forward, right onto Kore's boot with his chin. He sprang back up immediately and stood guard. Kore was simply too fast for him as she ran round him once, throwing him completely, and the crowd watched in utter delighted amazement as the arena champion used the challenger's unguarded lap as a step and jumped clean over him, pushing his visor down over his eyes! There was roars of laughter as the muscular man fought with his head-wear and when he did eventually dislodge it, Kore was sitting right in front of him, grinning. “I've heard all about ... ouch!” Ben was part of the almost universal grimace and double-over displayed by the crowd as Kore performed her finishing move. The unfortunate man's legs and eyes crossed and he crumpled forward. “Told you.” Ben was still wincing as his father did a bit of swift calculating of his return on that wager.

“Yes!” he guffawed a laugh. “She’s wonderful! Well done girlie!” He bellowed into the arena, quite ineffectively.

“She’s our star acquisition.” Bonetti spoiled the moment by speaking. Actually, Ben thought he spoiled any moment just by breathing. “And capable of so much more.” Bonetti got to his feet and Ben felt the alarm bells go off all round his head. “Stay put, gladiator!” Herz looked at Ben in confusion. “As a tribute to my honoured guest, I have a small treat in store. Overseers!” All eyes turned to the opponent’s tunnel. Ben just looked in disbelief as a mounted, fully armoured man entered the arena.

“Is this usual?” Herz asked Ben. “Horses?”

“I’m sure it isn’t.” Ben said in horror. “Administrator?”

“All part of the entertainment.” Bonetti said brightly.

“So this part is just show?” Herz asked uncertainly.

“The governor was kind enough to endorse it, for your enjoyment.” Bonetti replied.

“That isn’t what he asked you.” Ben looked at Bonetti. “Is this part staged just for demonstrative purposes?”

“If it is, it’s very well staged.” Herz said warily as the horse kicked Kore clean off her feet with its front hooves. “Will she be OK in there?” Kore replied by rolling under the beast and hacking a vicious slice out of the animal’s front leg tendon. The horse brayed in pain and fell to its side, narrowly missing Kore. “Bonetti, I’m not in favour of beasts being injured in the name of sport.” Herz said darkly.

“The horse or the gladiator?” Bonetti laughed and nodded towards the arena. Kore was tiring and flagging quite badly as the dismounted rider swiped at her with a mace. She received a crushing blow to her ribs, then another to the backs of her legs.

“Bonetti, stop the match. Get her out of there.” Ben said angrily.

“I’m sorry General Astrella, only the girl’s trainer can request that. As it happens, he has a fire in the Pit to sort out, poor man’s house was burning down last I heard. See? She’s fine!” Kore had miraculously retaliated by sweeping the legs from underneath the mace wielder. She struggled to her feet and slashed the weapon from his hand, severing arm tendons as she did so. Match over. The arena fell silent and all eyes turned to the balcony. Bonetti glowed under the attention. The spectators presumed this to be a demonstration too, a rehearsed, off-wager show, but the injuries that were appearing were suggesting otherwise. “Overseers!” Bonetti yelled at last, and Ben was dumbstruck, as was Herz.

“Shit!” Ben yelled as Jasmine entered the arena! She was clad in a ridiculous suit of leather armour that would have fit Jyp. “Bonetti! That girl is not a gladiator! She’s a civilian!”

“She’s an occupant of a state protected building.” Bonetti corrected. “Similar status to the jail-house, only they’re there of their own free will.” He shrugged.

Kore rubbed the sweat out of her eyes and squinted at the bulking figure of her next victim.

“Jasmine?” Jasmine was sobbing and crying uncontrollably. “What the shit is going on?” Kore looked towards the balcony, then at Jasmine again. “Jasmine it's OK, I won't hurt you. You know that, don't you?”

“Captain Pape arrested me!” Jasmine sobbed. “He said I had to either come here, or be thrown out into the gutter where I belonged. Why?”

“Because he's a bastard.” Kore fumed and lowered her sword. She turned towards Bonetti. “No.” She shouted and headed for the tunnel.

“A forfeit?” Bonetti shouted back. “Do we have a new champion? How refreshing! Overseers!” Kore spun round as a man and a woman entered the arena, both holding leashed, snarling hounds.

“Arsehole!” Kore spat. “Jasmine! Get behind me and stay there.” Jasmine lumbered over in her oversized armour and cowered against the wall. “Don't take those leathers off.” The woman unleashed her hound and it lunged straight for Jasmine. Had it not been for her leather padding and the fact that she was curled over, it would have ripped her throat out. Kore leapt at the animal and it spun round before she could deal a lethal blow. Saliva dripped from its snarling mouth as it dived for Kore's throat, it found her sword instead. She barely had time to feel its sticky blood on her body when she felt the other animal crashing into her back. The beast locked onto her shoulder pad, luckily, but refused to let go, thus weighing Kore to a stagger. The woman came towards Kore swinging a weighted net and the man had a triple barbed claw-hook. Kore managed to get a few hacks in at the hound before the woman launched her web. Jasmine rolled out, on her side, in the bulky suit, and caught the full impact of the net. It would have looked absolutely hilarious had it not been so seriously horrific. “Jasmine! Prop up your sword!” The weapon that Jasmine had been armed with could only just be classed as a sword. Kore had used bigger blades to carve her lunch. Jasmine squeaked and wedged her sword against the ground so it poked through the net. “Hold on tight!” Kore gauged the blade, and the attached hound, then swung herself backwards and downwards. The dog howled horribly as it was impaled on Jasmine's sword and Jasmine howled louder than the animal as the grisly corpse fell heavily on top of her. “Thanks Jasmine!” Kore yelled. “You're wonderful. Right bitch!” Kore bared her teeth at the unarmed woman who was looking in shock at her partner. “Eat shit.” She ran at the female beast-master in a frenzy and saw her partner running to intercept her. Kore held up her shield and the man hesitated. The woman tried to take advantage and rush Kore, but Kore delivered a perfect roundhouse kick and sent her sprawling, then she tuned her full, berserker, attention on the male gladiator. The crowd cheered like crazy when the man actually started backing away from Kore's onslaught, still Kore gained ground. When she had him backed against the wall she drew herself close to his face. “Keep your beast-fighting in the slums of Haggardan where it belongs.” She snarled, before knocking him out cold with the hilt of her sword. Haggardan was the only place where animal fights were legal, and so obviously, the only place where animals were trained in this way.

“Hooooooohaaar!!!!” Kore spun round in sheer fright at the shriek she heard, then just stood there blinking. Jasmine had chopped herself out of the net and was now attempting a shambling charge towards the now recovering woman. The crowd were absolutely delighted and cheered her on loudly and enthusiastically. Kore started to laugh at the sight, knowing full well that the beast-master was unarmed. Jasmine simply body slammed the trainer to the ground then rolled over her, sending billowing clouds of dust everywhere. Kore almost wet herself laughing as the irate call-girl grabbed the woman's hair and started banging her head against the ground, shrieking like a banshee all the while. Jasmine's next assault was a stinging face slap followed by an ear-splitting verbal tirade.

“Sit on her Jasmine.” Kore wheezed with laughter, making her damaged ribs hurt like all hell.

“What? I haven't finished! So if I ever hear of you abusing those poor dogs again, I'll tell my friend Faust Cooper to send you to the gem mines!” She screamed at the fallen trainer. “You hear me? You scraggy slut!” Jasmine finished off with a boot to the ribs, that set her off balance, and into a heap in her armour on the ground. Kore only just managed to help her get up without any leakage, and raised her hand with her own.

“Thank the Stars for that.” Ben almost collapsed in relief. Herz didn't know what to make of it. He didn't know if that was for real, or just an exhibition. Ben knew exactly what it was. Bonetti was furious. “Show's over dad. Come on ...” Gasps rippled round the crowds, followed by Jasmine's screaming. “What in shit's name's happened?” Everyone was on their feet, Kore was lying in the dirt with a feathered arrow protruding from her body. “No! Oh no!” Ben began pushing his way forward. Who the hell had shot that? “Dad! Order the arena sealed!”

“Govern ...”

“No dad, you do it! It'll minimise panic.” Ben began elbowing people out of the way and Jasmine's screams were being added to by other screams. “Get out of my way! This isn't a floor show, it's real. Let me through!” Ben shouted through the crowds.

“Kore? Kore stay awake!” Jasmine held Kore's head and sobbed over her. “Please Kore, don't leave me here with these dead dogs!” Kore tried to smile. The burning pain through her shoulder was unbearable. “Stay awake!” Face slap. “You can't just go and die! I'll tell you who fancies you if you stay awake.” Jasmine said desperately. Kore's laugh came out as a gurgling wheeze. “Ben Astrella! Oh yes he does! He hasn't been to the house in weeks and we all know why because Lady Blanche asked him outright! Open your eyes! Kore don't die!”

“Ben.” Kore whispered as she saw the General racing towards them.

“Yes! It's true, really. He's lovely isn't he? You lucky sow! You do like him don't you?” Jasmine looked through the tears as Kore's eyelids dragged. “Kore you're my hero. I always dreamt of being you. You're all that kept me going at times, the hope of me being in the arena with you. My dream came true but it can't end like this.”

“Jasmine” Ben dropped to the ground. “Where the hell is everyone?”

“Kore said the bastards had locked the tunnel.” Jasmine sobbed. Ben looked over to the tunnel gate and saw Shawn and Blacklock, among others, trying to force it open.

“Jyp. Jasmine where's Jyp?” He was answered by a barrage of alarmed screams from the balcony and turned to see people flying through the air. Jyp had made a 'door' in the side wall of the governor's porch. “Shit, my dad's up there! Jyp! This way!” Ben waved his arms around and tried to shout above the noise of the crowd. “Jyp! Go round that way! Other way!” Jyp saw Ben and nodded. “He'll go ballistic. Kore can you hear me?” Ben leant over the gladiator. “Shit no.” He looked desperately at Jasmine.

“No!” Jyp was there. “No, no, no!” He howled. “Little Lady deads?”

“No she isn't Jyp, not yet.” Ben aid urgently. “Jyp we can't get her out, look.” Ben nodded at the gate. “They locked the damned thing so Blacklock and Shawn couldn't get to her.” Jyp strode towards the gate in pure anger and the men had the sense to back up the tunnel a few feet. He grabbed the bars of the gate and pulled with all his might. The entire crowd watched in stunned shock as the roaring Nellatian first loosened the gate, then dislodged the gate, then flung it over the

other side of the arena. "Well done Jyp. Blacklock!" Gladiators spilled into the arena to be at Kore's side.

"She needs more than me patching her up this time." Blacklock was shaking from head to foot.

"The infirmary." Shawn went to lift Kore.

"No Shawn, Leo will never recover from this, it'll probably kill him with the shock." Blacklock said.

"Take her to the guest Villa." Ben said. "Yes I'm serious! Jasmine, can you get hold of physician Sillix?" Ben lifted Kore carefully off the ground.

"I can try. If they won't let me in, I have permission to send a message to Ursus. Don't worry, I won't let Leo see me." Jasmine started to run and fell over her armour. "Bollocks! Help me Shawn!"

Lily Astrella stood in the drawing room together with her husband, her son, a gladiator named Shawn, a gladiator trainer named Blacklock, a young girl called Jasmine, Jyp Freeman, Faust Cooper and Lady Ursus Toller! Outside the front door were a whole array of soldiers, including Captain Creed and cadets Rowan, Lumni, Roscus and Bowman. The latter cadet being regarded very suspiciously by the other three. In one of the seven bedrooms lay Kore and Physician Sillix had been with her for over two hours. Ben had had no choice but to explain the whole, corrupt situation to his parents. He told them everything, including the twins' discovery ten years ago, Leo's fabricated arrest, with permission of Ursus of course, and the persecution of Kore in person because of her position within the Pit. He told them of their suspicions regarding the re-securing of the pit and the arenas, and the re-opening of the dungeons. Ben told Ambassador and Lord Astrella everything.

"So you were just going to leave us in the dark regarding all this?" Ambassador Astrella asked, her voice shaking with emotion.

"With all respect ma'am, Ben, and the rest of us, hadn't much choice." Faust spoke up. "Any proof we have is circumstantial and theoretical. Probably all true, but not concrete enough for the seriousness of the situation. Lord Astrella, you saw for yourself today the way in which that girl is being harassed, very subtly but effectively. Apart from the arrow shot, obviously, no crimes were actually committed by arena standards. The dogs and the horses are unacceptable and most definitely not approved of, but not strictly illegal in the arena."

"Yet." Lily snapped angrily. "That arena is still part of Azoria. It isn't a mini Haggardan. But apparently that isn't the only thing that should be on the reform list. Let me get something clear here." She sat down and frowned at the fireplace. "Forgive me in advance, Ursus, but is Governor Toller a party to this corruption?"

"No forgiveness needed, Ambassador." Ursus replied. "Spence is guilty by ignorance. He's well aware of what's happening, and he's well aware that Bonetti is after his position as Governor. It might seem odd that he chooses not to work with the part of the Military that these people here represent but the reason for that is, his lack of confidence in their ability. He doesn't think they're on the winning side. By ignoring Bonetti's antics, and therefore giving him a free reign, he stands more of a chance of being shown leniency if Bonetti gets in power." Everyone was once again, very impressed with Ursus. "Of course there's also his personal thoughts in the equation. The situation with Leo embarrassed him and gave Bonetti's goons some ammunition for the future. Spence won't like that one bit. Leo isn't his favourite person just now." Ursus said in contempt. "And Leo couldn't give a rat's arse. He told me." Jasmine snorted a laugh at Lady Toller's language and Lily tried not

to smirk.

“You said no laws were broken, Faust, apart from the arrow, of course.” Herz said. “The tunnel gates? They weren't just jammed, or wedged, they were locked very securely. I saw it myself, Faust, it took every ounce of strength that this young fellow has to remove it.” He nodded at Jyp who only glanced at the group, then resumed his watch on the door he'd seen Kore being carried through.

“I think I know how they'll get round that.” Faust sighed. “Ben?”

“The dogs.” Ben nodded. “Security measures to stop fighting beasts from entering the cells. That's a very old law that was never updated because there's never been a need to, up to now.”

“And the young lady here?” Herz looked at Jasmine. “You were admirably, by the way, young lady, absolutely admirable.” Jasmine blushed to the roots of her hair and tried to hide under Shawn's arm.

“Dad, may I have a word?” Ben glanced at Jasmine. “Please? Jasmine?” Jasmine looked at her feet and nodded. “Thank you. Dad?” Ben led his father outside into the hallway. “Dad Jasmine is a brothel-girl.” He said bluntly.

“Really?” Herz said in surprise.

“Really. She's not the usual run of the mill brothel-girl though. The whole city loves her, men women and kids, because she's a terrific girl. She's so out of place in that job. Another war victim who doesn't know how else to earn a living.” Ben explained. “Obviously she lives at the brothel and as you know, some of the more classy ones are government subsidised.”

“I get the picture.” Herz said wearily. “We own you so you do it' type of thing.” Ben nodded. “Another antiquated rule. How in hell are they still there? It was naturally presumed that Azoria would have the sense to update it's bloody laws!”

“It was clearly more advantageous to conveniently forget about some. Dad? One more thing, before we go back.” Ben rubbed his fingers through his long black hair. “I'm sorry for not telling you who Kore was. It was selfish of me and I realise it must have been a bit of a surprise to see her in that arena today. I'd also like to make it clear that although she's obviously very special to me, so is her brother, that's as far as it goes.” Ben said awkwardly. “I know you and mum got hold of the wrong end of the stick, and I'm thinking Jyp reinforced that unintentionally.”

“Yes, he said he was her chaperone.” Herz was smirking when his son looked up. “Why is that as far as it goes?”

“Huh? Well it just does. We're friends, that's all.” Ben said in confusion.

“I know that. What are you hoping I'll say?” Herz said. “If I said ... well thank the Stars for that! A gladiator! Oh no! ... I'm sure that might affect your way of thought. She'll be your friend forever. Parental approval is very important Ben, but don't presume you know the outcome when you don't. You're assuming that your mother and I would disapprove of a gladiator. Am I right?”

“Yes. It is true though that we are just friends, I swear it is.” Ben sounded like a fifteen year old who'd just been caught out.

“I believe you. If you were OK with that, you'd never have thought it important enough to mention it to me.” Herz stated.

“So do you? Disapprove?” Ben asked innocently. “Just for future reference, you understand.”

“No not as such.” Herz frowned at the floor. “Do you know anything about her at all?”

“Just her life here.” Ben shrugged. “As far as anyone, including themselves, knows, there was no life before that. They were too young to remember it.”

“No name?”

“None. They sometimes use the name Blacklock seeing he brought them up. Why? I mean, does it matter? The war caused their situation thankfully it's gone now. Valuing people by their names is ridiculous, dad.” Ben said.

“Yes, of course it is. I agree with you.” Herz nodded. “She's a remarkable young woman, Ben.” Ben smiled at his father. “Reminds me of your mother in a way. Same excitable nature.”

“Still driving you up the wall then?”

“Every day. I wouldn't have it any other way.” Herz opened the door to the drawing room and they rejoined the others.

Chapter 16

Administrator Bonetti and General Marx sat in a cramped storage room in the Ambassadorial Villa and watched the wall. A three foot square panel had been slid aside, revealing a dark tunnel and Captain Pape had entered that tunnel a full twenty minutes ago.

“Silly old fossil will be giving Pape the run around.” Marx said in irritation. “He dashes from room to room and we have to corner the senile old lunatic.” Loram DeGaise had used this tunnel the night that Kore had been chased around the building. Usually, a very stout lock on the outside of the storage room door prevented any further progression into the Villa but on that night, Loram had been sitting in one of the first floor studies, 'in conference'. Marx had been shocked beyond belief that Ben Astrella's theory that night had been so accurate. Luckily, so much else had gone on that it hadn't been pursued.

“Say please.” A voice drifted down the tunnel.

“I did! You're half way down the damned thing. Come on, move it.” Pape sounded very annoyed indeed.

“No.”

“For shit's sake. Please? Please Emperor DeGaise? Thank you. Daft old buzzard.”

“I don't like this room.” Loram DeGaise rolled forwards into the storage room, colliding with Bonetti's feet. “Purple for that wall, I think. How about a nice pearly grey for the ceiling?” He sat cross-legged in front of the Administrator. “You could do with a coat or two yourself, Bonetti.”

“Loram we have a problem of a very serious nature.” Bonetti ignored Loram's foolish remarks. “We had a glimpse of just how forceful the Athulan rabble are today.”

“So kick their arses!” Loram shrugged. “Oh you can't, can you? Your own fault for going all democratic. Bunch of milk-maids.” He sniffed. “So they're still behaving themselves eh?” Loram smirked and Bonetti did not look pleased at all.

“We need funding and ... persuasion ... to access records in Tibrae. We need names, Loram. We need descendants. These descendants aren't innocent victims anymore, they've gradually realised that they were mistreated by you and are making moves towards rectifying it.” Bonetti lied. He needed the gladiators provoked and which name out of all other names would cause a negative reaction? The name of DeGaise. Bonetti wanted not the name of Athula descendants, but DeGaise descendants. He'd hoped beyond hope that he could link Toller with the name, but no matter how far he'd looked into their very limited resources, he tuned up nothing. Bonetti needed access to more resources but simply did not have the legal authority to demand it of the Tibrean government and their extensive pre-war library. The Tibreans would not be able to be bribed, Bonetti knew that would be a waste of time, so they needed other persuasions. He had Lord and Lady Astrella right there on his doorstep, now all he needed was a way to persuade them to grant him authority for his research. Loram DeGaise could actually remember details, in his more lucid moments, and that was

all Bonetti would need. Even a shaky suggestion in the right direction could produce excellent results if worked on properly. This method would almost certainly succeed with Leo, had the unexpected factor of Ursus Toller not presented itself. “Loram we need the Astrella's permission to access their library.” Loram nodded slowly, digesting all of this as best he could.

“They'll tell you to piss off, Bonetti, probably have you thrown in the dungeon for being an arse-wipe too.” Loram concluded. “Mistreated by me.” He sighed sadly. “Your words cut to my bones Bonetti.”

“It's a sad fact that these animals still bear the grudge.” Bonetti said in false sympathy. “Hence our utmost attempts to control their presence and role in Azoria.” Loram nodded again, then stood up abruptly.

“Sod off.” He said rudely, and darted back into the tunnel.

“Wha ... ? Get after him Pape!” Bonetti snapped. What the hell was he doing now? The Athulan rabble threat worked every time! Pape dragged Loram back into the room by his leggings.

“I like Ambassadors.” Loram said stubbornly. “Very clever people. If you had a clever Ambassador on your side, then you wouldn't be trying to blackmail their favours. Or are you suggesting that the Ambassador is Athula too? I can tell you, she most definitely isn't.”

“Damn it.” Bonetti cursed. Of all the times to be almost totally lucid, he picked that time. “Loram your life could be in danger, we're thinking of your safety, you know that.”

“The Athulans will kill me?” Loram whimpered on purpose and curled up against the wall.

“Without hesitation.” Bonetti assured him. “We wouldn't let them the first time and we won't this time, but we need identities, Loram.”

“Of Athulans?” Loram simpered, looking wildly round the room.

“Yes but official identities of convicted, documented persons and for that we need the library in Tibrae. Yes?” Bonetti said eagerly. This was more like it.

“I have an idea.” Loram said feebly and Bonetti nodded encouragingly. “Ask Lord and Lady Astrella about the gladiator girl.”

“What?” Bonetti tried not to shout. “Loram we know about the gladiator girl. She was a foundling, along with her brother. We need documents, official documents. The only documentation those two have are gladiator licenses signed by Blacklock.” The gladiator girl's role was sorted out, in Bonetti's opinion. She would lead the revolt for him to quash, as per original plan, and nothing more. This was getting tedious. How hard should it be to cause a riot among a gang of aggressive ex-criminals?! “Have you nothing more useful that I could mention to the Astrellas?”

“Are you sure the gladiators will kill me?” Loram gave Bonetti another chance to consider this. “With all you soldiers around?”

“They wouldn't give a second thought to it.” Bonetti answered promptly, and firmly. “As for the soldiers, well if it wasn't so obviously illegal, they'd kill them too. It's a rift, Loram, you caused it, remember?”

“I remember.” Loram said sadly. “Some people just won't leave my mistake in the past eh?”

“Correct, unfortunately.” Bonetti sighed. “The Astrellas?”

“Where have I heard that name before?” Loram mused and Bonetti rolled his eyes. “Oh I know! There was a very pretty girl from Haggardan called Astrella. Umm no, hang on, it was Astartum. Belle Astratum! My, she was pretty.” Loram smiled, happily withdrawn into his own head once more. “I think I once had her portrait painted for the grand library here. Is it still there?”

“No Loram, you tore down the library, never mind the portrait.” Bonetti said wearily.

“Did I? What a silly old duffer I am. What a thing to do! I love libraries! See about building me another, will you Bonetti? I'd like this one adorned with pink and orange stars, like this.” Loram showed the Administrator his stockings.

“If you go home and draw me a plan, I'll look over it.” Bonetti said absently.

“Splendid!” Loram jumped to his feet. “I'll release a deposit form as soon as I get home. Same treasurer?”

“Yes, I'm the treasurer.” Bonetti sighed. “Still.” He handed Loram a money deposit paper, already filled out to get money from the DeGaise 'confiscated assets' fund to the government treasury, via a maze of channels that would confound the most educated navigator.

“That should do.” Loram handed back the paper and wafted his hand at Bonetti. “May I have a tunic like yours?”

“Er ... no, I don't think so.” Bonetti nodded at Pape to get Loram back into his tunnel. “This will be locked again, for your own safety.” He stood next to the door while Loram chatted away to Pape as they crawled into the tunnel. “Well that was a waste of time, Marx. Oh well, we got a fund booster out of it.”

“You don't think mentioning the gladiator to the Astrellas will be any use?” Marx asked.

“You're obsessed, Marx. I know you don't like those two in particular but don't let it obsess you. Once the girl has served her purpose and has been jailed for it, you can do as you please, as long as you remember that the only way she leaves Azoria, is bound for the Killian gem mines.

Any pre-punishments to that are as you see fit. I've already promised the other twin to Toller.”

“I can't believe it's so difficult to get that scum to make the first move! Just one little slip away from the rules is all I need.” Marx narrowed his eyes.

“And it's Ben Astrella's role in the situation to prevent them doing that. Blast the man. Have you apprehended Hebbon? I can't believe the imbecile missed her. I was assured that he was the best marksman in the city.” Bonetti grumbled.

“He's to be financed and authorised for re-location in Canuska. There are only himself and his father so it won't be difficult.” Marx said. “He was a long shot anyway, not guaranteed.”

“Long shot? He was almost sitting on her! Yes I know what you mean. Manage, Pape?” Pape was re-emerging from the tunnel.

“Yes Sir. He wants his library tiled in flowered glass.”

Spence Toller stood and watched as Leo convulsed in such a severe coughing fit that he was foaming blood at his mouth.

“I ... don't ... belie ...”

“You don't have to. Is she here?” Toller said quietly. He'd picked his moment to visit Leo, knowing that Sillix had been called to the Villa to attend to Kore. Sillix would never have allowed even the Governor to impart such dramatic news to his patient. “She's going to die. That arrow pinned her to the arena floor and before that she'd sustained fractured ribs and a damaged shoulder bone as well as a whole hail of cuts and bruises. She was a bloodied mess, librarian.” He stepped away from the bed as Leo tried to stumble out of it. “You'll never reach her in time, you'll die trying. You are going to die apart and alone.” Leo's body contorted on the floor as he gasped for breath and Toller watched the cause of all his embarrassment, past, present and future, as his lips turned a dull blue.

“... sus.” Leo gasped.

“What? Do my ears deceive me?” Toller laughed viciously. “You have the gall to call out for my wife?”

“Ex-wife.” Ursus appeared behind the governor and held a razor sharp stiletto blade to the side of his throat. “Don't even try to move, Spence, I'll puncture your veins as though you were a stuck-pig. Dom? Did you hear all that?”

“Yes ma'am.” Dom appeared and bound the Governor's wrists together. “As did Cadet Rowan and Captain Creed. Cadet Rowan has gone for help ma'am.” Ursus withdrew her blade once Spence was immobilised.

“You are to be held on charge of purposely neglecting to secure medical assistance for this man with the intention of endangering his life.” Creed resisted the urge to take his feet to Governor Toller. “Depending on the outcome of this man's current condition, that might be elevated to wilful murder.”

“Your procedure is incorrect and therefore invalid.” Toller shrugged.

“My procedure is fine, Governor Toller. Myself, Cadet Rowan and Deputy Consultant Ambassador Vinter.” Creed stated. “You were officially divorced forty-five minutes ago, on the grounds of impotency, with the authorisation of Ambassador Astrella of Tibrae.” He said officially, with a very smug grin. “Forty-two minutes ago, Ursus Vinter was appointed the position of Azorian Deputy Consultant to Tibrae by Lord Astrella. Myself, Cadet Roscus and Cadet Rowan escorted her here so she could impart this news to her friend, thus informing him that she may not be available to keep an appointment to visit him here. How's that for style, Toller?” Actually they'd come to tell Leo that Kore had been injured, but with the intent to play down the injuries dramatically until Kore's health could be determined, and Leo's health improved. They'd have to tell Leo something, otherwise his sister would be conspicuous in her absence. It seemed that Toller had saved them a job.

Ursus seemed to have calmed Leo somewhat simply by telling him the absolute truth. He was much reassured to hear that Sillix was tending to her and that she wasn't alone with only Blacklock's well intended, but unqualified ministrations. He was still a ghastly shade of grey when Second Physician Nomnia hurried into the room. Creed excused himself and Cadet Rowan and left with Toller, who'd gone into extreme shock. Creed had decided to call in Barnabus for his physician's examination on admission to the jail-house. Ursus held on to Leo's hand while Nomnia tended to him and she held

the steam inhalation bowl that would open up Leo's airways.

“Sillix will be here soon Leo.” Ursus said gently. “Although I doubt you could be in better hands than this right now.” She complimented Nomnia's skill.

“I agree.” Leo whispered and looked at Ursus's hand covering his own. “Am ... ambassador?” He asked, then coughed violently again.

“Yes. Hush Leo, there's plenty of time for me to brag about that.” Ursus smiled. “I was well advised by very trustworthy and knowledgeable people. Ambassador Lily Astrella knows absolutely everything and has the clout to back it up. Anything she hasn't the authority to do, Lord Astrella has.” She laughed. “What a team!”

“They don't mind Kore being there?” Leo said drowsily.

“Absolutely not. Ben carried her all the way from the arena.”

“Did he now?” Leo smiled and his eyelids dragged after getting a few lungs full of whatever herbal concoction Nomnia had put in the inhaler. “Spence ...”

“Spence's arse. Don't even think about him, he's history.” Ursus took the inhaler from Leo's face. “Cold hearted bastard.” She shuddered when she remembered her former husband just standing there watching another man dying in agony and despair! Had Creed not been there to stop her, Ursus would have drove that spike straight through the monster's throat. “I'll testify against him, as will Creed, Rowan, Roscus, and yourself. He's finished, Leo.”

“Bonetti ...”

“Sleep.” Ursus ordered. “I don't know what will happen now, but we have the big guns and it's all because of Kore and your love for each other. You must rest.”

“Deputy's orders?” Leo smiled.

“Definitely. Nomnia, this is going to sound ridiculous, but I can be contacted at the brothel if there's any change here with Leo.” Ursus said, and both Leo and the physician had a coughing fit apiece.

“Hey I have to have an office room somewhere!” Ursus laughed. “I'm in a disused annex together with Jasmine. She's a marvel and no mistake. She knows everyone and their auntie Marys.” She stood up and secured her hood and cape. “I'm off to order a nice plaque for my door.” She smiled at Leo and turned to leave.

“Ursus.” Leo slurred. “Just ... well ... thank you.”

“Thank me by getting better. I have no one to take me out to dinner.” Ursus said and Roscus also nodded his farewell as they left.

Ursus didn't go to order her plaque, obviously, she went straight back to the Villa.

“Hell's bowels!” Ben got to his feet. “I'll have to get down there with Creed. Marx?”

“I don't know if he's at the jail or not.” Ursus replied. Ben nodded and headed for the door. “Dom, would you be willing to come and tell me if there's any news on Kore, please?”

“Of course, Sir.” Dom nodded eagerly. The young Cadet was having a huge struggle taking in the enormity of all this. He'd gone from a complete learner who no one even noticed, to quite an important part in the situation, and had been privy to information and procedures that most soldiers never got to know in decades.

“This doesn't actually make a lot of difference.” Faust observed. “I know Bonetti will be in like a vulture but he's doing that already. He wanted to use a gladiator riot to get rid of Toller and to do his heroics simultaneously, only with the unanimous adoration of the people would he have unanimous power.”

“I agree.” Herz said. “It takes something as powerful as a war to create something as powerful as a dictator. Anything less just won't create the desperation in the population to trust just one person. We only have two Generals involved at the moment, in any noticeable capacity, Ben and Marx. We know where they stand, obviously. What about the other divisional Generals? Ursus?”

“Marx and Ben are the two involved in this Quarter. It's the only Quarter with two Generals because Ben is, to all purposes, the coordinating General to all four Quarters, as you were, Faust.” Faust nodded. “It just so happens that he's based in Quarter three. Quarter One comes under General Asmedus Poly and he works in compliment with Ben. Ben will tell you better than I can, but I don't think he's pro-Bonetti at all. Quarter Two is still ran by General Tomas Pithlay, Faust.” Faust let out a loud snort.

“He's older than I am! He's also in support of whoever can offer him the most money and do the most jobs for him. He's a lazy mess of a man who should have been put out to grass years ago. He'll be right up Bonetti's arse ... I mean ... back ... as soon as he knows Toller's gone. Creep.” Faust said in disgust. “Who's in Four? Please don't tell me it's Marcus Nestus. Now he is an antique.”

“No.” Ursus laughed. “His senility eventually got too much to ignore. He started conducting training sessions in the nude and insisting that the Cadet's wore bustiers on duty.”

“What's a bustier?” Faust asked and Herz shrugged.

“One of these.” Lily pointed to her lace fronted dress-top with frilled edging.

“Silly old toad.” Faust exclaimed. “Did they drown him? I would have.”

“They retired him into the care of one of the more sympathetic families in Quarter Four.” Ursus laughed. “He was replaced by his rather placid Captain, who is now General Coor Baxi. I'm not too sure about Baxi because nothing was ever mentioned about him. I think he's very much a 'do as you're told' type man, by just about everyone. The division seems to run itself over there, with or without Baxi.”

“Probably had no choice with the other clay-head in charge.” Faust reasoned. “They'll have been used to organising themselves for years. I think a trip out there might be in order, just to get the feel of the place.” Quarter Four was the furthest away from the city area of Azoria, and therefore, communicated with less. It's bridge was the least used of all the bridges and lead only to a small huddle of arable farms, followed by a huge inlet of the Lake that was wide enough not to have a visible shoreline on the other side. Quarter Four had actually been the first choice for the gladiator's Pit but it was going to prove too costly to transport them to the arena and back. “You up for it Roscus?”

“Absolutely, Sir!” Dom felt very honoured indeed. It was awesome enough to be in the same

company as a legend like Faust Cooper, but to actually be on a mission with him was incredible!

The conversation was interrupted by Jyp jumping to his feet and almost dragging the door off its hinges. He'd heard a door closing somewhere up the hallway and darted out to accost physician Sillix.

“Hers not dead? You making Little Lady better? Getting pointy arrow out of arm? Letting Jyp see arrow?”

“Jyp, ease up a bit.” Blacklock got stiffly out of his chair. He'd actually fallen asleep after he'd sent Shawn back to the Pit to calm the other gladiators. Sillix looked tired and drawn and his fingers were still bloodstained.

“She's still unconscious, and very ill.” He said eventually. “I removed the arrow head and drew the missile out the same way as it went in.” He produced the blood-soaked arrow from a sack and handed it to Jyp. “I had to place stitches both inside and out, the inner stitches have a tail thread exposed that must not be tampered with at all. I'll remove the inner stitches, using that, when the time's right.” Everyone nodded their understanding. “I relocated her collar bone so thank the stars she wasn't awake for that. I put seventeen stitches in her side, and a support round three broken ribs. I also relocated her left kneecap and strapped that in place and put four stitches in a gash on the same leg. She has two stitches inside her mouth where her teeth punctured the skin. The single stitch on her right arm is due to the incision I had to make to get purifiers into her bloodstream. The one hundred and two single stitches around the arrow wound were due to deep splintering of the missile itself. The other cuts and the bruising will heal naturally with regular cleaning.” Sillix finished his list and everyone just stared at him in silence. “I estimated, just by a general examination, that she's had at least seven forearm fractures and twelve upper arm fractures, two lower leg fractures and one upper leg fracture, both sides of her collar bone have been snapped at some time and it's a good job her hair is so long and beautiful otherwise you'd see mesh of scars on her scalp that resembled a map of Plaus. How old is she?” Sillix accepted a glass of wine from Herz.

“Twenty.” Blacklock muttered. He felt like crying in shame at what he'd put Kore through. He felt like he'd inflicted every single one of those injuries himself. He remembered carrying Kore to physician Sillix's house when she was fifteen years old and had suffered a broken leg defending her championship. Sillix had turned them away with the opinion that if they hadn't been criminals, they wouldn't be there. He'd refused to treat people that 'brought it on themselves', to use his own words. Obviously his views had changed over the years but it had lead Blacklock to learn how to take care of his gladiators, and he had. This was possibly the upper leg injury that Sillix had found.

“Physician Sillix, I doubt there's a single person in the Pit who hasn't suggested that Kore retires from the arena, myself included, and her brother most assertively. Maybe she'll listen to man of medicine when it concerns her own health, maybe she won't. Can you guarantee her a position if she accepts retirement? May she come to you and train as a physician?”

“It takes years to train as a physician.” Sillix missed the point on purpose. “There are positions available Blacklock, her brother is proof of that.”

“Her brother is exceptional, he's intellectually gifted, and lets not forget who's money put him there. Kore's. I've heard of just about every 'position' that's become available for the last five years Sillix because I've made it my business to. I wouldn't set my worst enemy up to any of them.”

“Then you're thinking only of yourself and your income, Blacklock.” Sillix said and Faust glanced at Herz. That wasn't a very smart thing to say to a gladiator trainer like Blacklock, especially

regarding Kore.

“I think Blacklock is referring to the types of jobs available to ex-gladiators.” Faust said quickly.

“I am.” Blacklock said flatly. “I’ll explain. The last five so called positions that would accept someone from the Pit were kitchen cleaner, midden cleaner, lawn tender, fruit treader and grave digger. Before that it was arena sweeper, beast minder, corpse removal at the infirmary, waste removal at the parliament building and masseuse to a governmental personage. Any of those not involve dirt, dead things, or human excrement? The masseuse job involves all three.” Faust snorted a laugh and Sillix gave him a dirty look. “Sillix, I’m not proud or impressed at all those injuries on a twenty year old girl, I could weep from my soul at the thought of it, but she was brought here at a time when there was no choice but to train her, and train her to survive. Leo too. What I am proud and impressed with is their dignity, and I’m proud of myself for giving them that.”

“A very good example is sitting right here.” Ursus indicated herself. “I went from a useless accessory to a ambassadorial assistant on one giant leap. Kore’s giant leap would be to the parliament wash-rooms on bowl emptying duty. It’s a giant leap, but it’s a backwards one.”

“So she’s going to continue in the arena until she dies in the arena?” Sillix sighed. “I’m not here to judge and I’m not here to comment on governmental employment rules. I’m a physician and at this present moment I have the tragic situation of two siblings who aren’t guaranteed their lives. I can advise both to avoid the situations that caused their health predicaments, nothing more.”

“Of course.” Blacklock nodded. “I don’t think Leo will need much persuading to avoid damp jail-cells. I intend to tell Kore of your concerns, preferably in the presence of Leo. He’ll badger her forever.”

“I must go and check on Leo.” Sillix stood up. “Physician Nomnia is my most respected trainee and he specialises in herbal healing, something that lung ailments respond very well to.”

Sillix let himself out.

“If Little Lady marry Captain Soldier then her not having to fight.” Jyp reasoned. “Her have no parents.” He said to Lord and Ambassador Astrella. “Jyp thinking you two is perfectest parents for Little Lady.”

“Er ... thank you Jyp.” Lily smiled in amusement and looked at her husband.

“You’re a a perfect chaperone too, young fellow.” Herz told Jyp.

“Thanking you. Jyp goes to sleep on floor now.”

“Jyp, there’s plenty of beds.” Lily offered.

“Jyp not have ever slept on bed. Jyp not getting on Little Lady’s bed anyhoo, is not seemly.” He said knowingly and ambled off towards Kore’s room.

“I should be getting back to Jasmine.” Ursus also stood up. “I left her moving all her belongings into the annex. She said she was going to fix it up.”

“As a ... what, exactly?” Herz asked warily.

“As an Ambassadorial office, don’t worry, Lord Astrella.” Ursus laughed. “We have big plans for

the place as an advisory centre for the people from all Quarters. Most of them can't afford legal advise from the government and I don't need their money seeing as Lady Blanche isn't charging me for the annex. She's just pleased it's being lived in to minimise damp damage.”

“What about Jasmine?” Lily asked. “She has to put food on her table Ursus. You don't need their money for your services, but she does.”

“It's completely up to her. She has no confidence as yet, naturally. She's never worked as anything else.” Ursus said sadly. “Any time she does anything with me regarding other matters aside from her usual job, I'll pay her from my own coffers. It's my guess that she'll put less and less importance on her existence in the brothel once the financial necessity isn't there.”

“She's a very bright girl is that one.” Faust contributed. “Some you can just tell don't belong there, like a fish out of water. She'll be a miss, though.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Er ... to those that are prone to the place ... umm ... so I believe.”

“Faust, open your mouth a bit further so you can put your other foot in it.” Lily laughed.

“I'd better shut up eh?” Faust laughed. “Come on Blacklock, we'll escort Deputy Vinter to her offices, then we'll go and give Nap something to clean up in his Tavern.”

“I'm already giving Dresk something to clean up in his, namely his back room. My house was burned down today.”

“What?!” Faust exclaimed.

“That's right!” Herz put in. “Damn my manners, I completely forgot Bonetti mentioning that! I'm so sorry Blacklock. If there's anything Ambassador Astrella and myse ...”

“Well of course there is!” Lily butted in. “Throw an inconvenience claim into the government because of the repairs on the other Villa then dish it out to Blacklock, off the books, as compensation. Insurance type thing.”

“I doubt the legality of that.” Herz frowned at his wife.

“And I doubt the legality of governmental revenue here just now. We'll see to it Blacklock.” Lily smiled at the bewildered trainer.

“Thank you ma'am, Sir.” He stammered. “The Tavern awaits us Faust.”

“A bit magnanimous of you there, Lily.” Herz observed when they were alone.

“Rubbish! The man's house catches fire at the same time as an assassination attempt on his champion? I'm a bit rusty on matters gladiatorial, but wouldn't he be the only one who could pull her out of a match?”

“You're right. In fact Bonetti mentioned that too when Ben demanded he stop the fight with the horse rider. I doubt I'll ever visit another arena as long as I live, after that. It was grotesquely orchestrated so that everyone, myself included, presumed the 'extras' to be an exhibition, otherwise the crowd would have objected quite forcefully. They loved her out there Lily, it was unbelievable. I've never seen such support and admiration for an arena champion in all my time as a spectator of the sport. She's a city-wide celebrity. I can fully understand why she'd flatly refuse to go and clean

middens for a living.”

“She certainly seems to captured the affections of my men anyway.” Lily hugged her husband.
“Father and son obviously have the same taste in women.”

“Odd you should say that, I told Ben she reminded me of you. Impulsive and rash and a temper from hell.” Herz smiled at Lily. “You'd have made a kick-arse gladiator.”

Chapter 17

Creed put sense before revenge and huddled Toller along back-streets and through a rear entrance of the jail-house. From there, he made sure that this reptile was secured in a cell among unoccupied cells. Even though this man deserved to be lynched, no one needed the backlash and repercussions caused by the arrest of the Governor of Azoria, it was going to be impactful enough. Captain Janus Hax took at least ten minutes to recover from the sight of their latest prisoner and he eventually dispatched Cadet Willus in search of physician Barnabus.

“Try Bard's Tavern first!” Hax shouted after the Cadet. “I'm presuming General Marx will be here soon?” He said to Creed.

“And the rest of the floor show.” Creed answered, filling out his report forms. “I just hope he's not here before General Astrella. Are you wanting to say something, Governor Toller?” Toller had walked over to the bars and was now just staring at the two Captains. “As you just heard, General Marx will be here soon, probably with Administrator Bonetti. It may be wise if you kept your comments to yourself until they're here. How's that report coming along Rowan?” Rowan nodded and carried on writing. Arrangements had also been made for reports to be collected from Roscus, Deputy Vinter, two infirmary staff and physician Nomnia, who all witnessed the atrocity, either visually, aurally, or both.

“Bonetti will have me out of here before morning.” Toller said arrogantly. “I never touched the man.”

“I know. That isn't what you were charged with, remember? Ben, I'm pleased you got here first.” Creed turned his attention to Ben and handed him his detail report, Rowan did likewise. Ben read them and looked at Toller.

“You bloody fool.” He sighed. “Is this the way you wanted your term in office to end?”

“It was ending anyway, Astrella. I'm not in disfavour with my pending replacement, quite the contrary. I exposed a dangerous potential threat tonight. You might not see it yet, but you will.” Toller pointed at Ben.

“Leo is not the source of your situation, Governor Toller, and you'd see that if you opened your eyes. Apart from his initial arrest, he was never mentioned again, don't you see that? Leo could no more embarrass you, or undermine you, than any other person right here could.”

“I don't deserve this.” Toller sat down and sighed. “My political career was being affected by my own behaviour, I know that. Did I deserve it accelerated by other people?”

“Were you exploited, do you mean?” Ben asked. “Absolutely. Your personal, domestic situation is a separate issue entirely, as it should be.”

“Ursus got the first punch in.” Toller smiled sadly. “She'll be a very wealthy woman, Astrella. Don't let the arseholes out there latch onto her like parasites.”

"I don't think she'd allow that." Ben assured him. "You had a real gem there, Toller, and you didn't even notice it." Ben shook his head.

"Are you supposed to be questioning the Governor alone?" General Marx was there, and still bore the signs of shock.

"Chatting, not questioning." Ben said shortly. "Have you read the reports?"

"I have, as has Administrator Bonetti." No surprise there. "Any fool can tell that was a personal vendetta brought about by the situation with his wife and the librarian." Marx glanced at Toller who looked panic stricken. "Which just goes to show that he isn't in the soundest of mental health and certainly not fit enough to be Governor."

"You buffoon!" Toller yelled. "Get Bonetti in here right now! I'm as sane as you are!"

"And that makes it alright? Captain Creed, Will you tell the Administrator that Governor Toller is asking for him, please?" Ben smiled at Creed.

"I have no idea what you're playing at Marx, but I'll see you in the out-plains for this." Toller snarled. "Bonetti! Get this imbecile out of here." He waved his hands at Marx, who obediently left. "Now then, you've read those reports Bonetti, as seen from one angle only. May I give you my account of the events?"

"Please do." Bonetti sat himself down and Ben leaned against the wall.

"I intended to inform Leo that any future references to the false accusations made against him, would be disregarded by everyone. By everyone, I mean persons who could drag the issue up in the future to discredit him too. I didn't get the chance. I do believe the man's partially delirious and I assume that's what caused him to lunge at me, on sight. I was naturally quite shocked and my shock delayed my reactions. By the time it occurred to me to run for help, Lady ... Deputy Vinter had a knife to my throat." Toller almost choked on his former wife's name and title.

"According to those reports, this alleged shock lasted from when you entered Leo's infirmary room, until Deputy Vinter saw you in there, twenty minutes later." Bonetti mused.

"Bonetti!" Toller shrieked. "What are you saying? I was in shock, man!"

"He's trying to get rid of you." Ben muttered and Bonetti spun round on him.

"I am rid of him!" He snapped. "His own perverse behaviour did that job for me."

"And now you'll just step right in as Governor and tell the whole world how you saved it from a murderous, insane leader? Administrator Bonetti, you are so predictable it's frightening." Ben sighed. "The fact that the victim in this is an ex-gladiator, and thus covered by gladiator sympathy could only be seen as a plus by you. Children in the school house could work that out, Bonetti." Ben rolled his eyes in feigned boredom. "He's still the Governor until he's convicted by tribunal. Protracted shock sounds quite plausible to me, Governor Toller."

"Huh?" Toller looked at Ben in confusion.

"You're going to stand for him?" Bonetti blinked then laughed loudly.

“Not at all. I know what he tried to do to Leo.” Ben said. “What I will do, though, is prevent you sensationalising the whole thing for your own campaign. I'll play down every turn you make, Administrator Bonetti, and you will not provoke the gladiators because the only one they'd heed is currently in bed, very sick in the guest Villa.”

“Doesn't take much working out whose bed.” Bonetti muttered.

“That would be another plus for me, would it not?” Ben refused to be riled. “I find it quite admirable that Governor Toller, who was obviously under a lot of stress due to such things as erroneous arrests, false code one alarms, expenditure for industrial block hinges, substandard prison conditions, accidents in the arena, imported war-hounds, all of which can be easily looked into, still found it in him to go and make peace with the man who was an innocent party in all this, even though the whole tragic situation was affecting his marriage.” Toller nodded furiously. “I've no doubt that the tribunal will find him negligent as charged, but I'll make sure that every extenuating circumstance I can find is thrown into the mix. You won't get the impact you're looking for, Bonetti. He has nothing to lose, remember, he's on rock bottom as it stands now so any investigations I do will be an improvement. Even if the result is only a partial redemption of his name, it's the difference between the gem mines and a mere exile to Haggardan for him, and the difference between an immediate governmental ascension and a civic election for you.”

“I am treating this as a very serious threat by you, General Astrella.” Bonetti stood up. “You are standing in the way of official justice and that in itself is a punishable offence.”

“Only if it cumulates to an obstruction to the truth.” Ben replied. Marx turned to glare at Toller who was threatening to go into shock again.

“Have you asked yourself what your wife was actually doing there, Toller? Creed said it was to inform the librarian of her new appointment. Why would she rush straight to the infirmary, before anywhere else, to tell a man who is an 'innocent party'? Innocent as hell, Toller, use your brain.” Bonetti said nastily.

“Well yes he is, Bonetti, that was the whole shit hitting the wind wasn't it? I know what you're trying to imply and it won't work. Ursus and myself are no longer married, as you know. I never expected to see that day, I admit, but she did as she saw fit.” Toller shrugged. “She warned me several times about you, Bonetti and I chastised her for meddling into affairs she knew nothing of. It seems like she knew more that I gave her credit for.”

“It'll be her giving you credit when she's sitting on your estate.” Bonetti sniped.

“Again, it won't work, Bonetti, give it up. I've listened enough to your shit and look where I am. Yes, Ursus gets the estate and that distresses me, obviously. If you had your way, I'd be discarded to the gem mines with no chance at all of rebuilding even a few coins worth of estate. I'll take Haggardan, my life, and the regrets I have for heeding you, and the issue discrediting, impotency laden ghosts coming to haunt me, won't apply. Go away Bonetti, you make me sick.” Toller sat down on his bunk and looked at the floor.

“Will you use that in your background report, physician Barnabus?” Ben asked casually and Bonetti spun round. The blotchy faced physician had been taking notes.

“Seems sane enough just now.” Barnabus said. “So a stress induced blackout can't be ruled out, I dare say. Excuse me men, I'll go conduct the rest of my examination.” He handed Ben his gin flask and headed for the cells.

The apprehension of Governor Toller necessitated an emergency meeting of parliament and was very much insisted on by Lord Astrella.

“As senior Administrator to Governor Toller, I will humbly accept the governmental role that he is unfortunately unable to fill at this moment.” Bonetti said graciously. Lily made a wretching face behind her husband's back, but in view of Ursus, who tried not to look at the Ambassador for fear of laughing out loud.

“I wasn't aware it had been offered to you.” Lord Astrella was in no way impressed by this man, and the horrendous situation at the arena had fortified his opinions tenfold.

“Go Herz!” Lily whispered and he turned round and flared his nostrils at her.

“With all respect Lord Astrella, someone has to oversee the empire.” Bonetti said with a sickly smile.

“Do you mean Azoria?” Lord Astrella glared at Bonetti for this subconscious slip of arrogant mis-terminology. “Automatic succession would be applicable had Governor Toller been convicted by a tribunal. He has not, as yet. His position is defined as ...” Lord Astrella referred to a book on the table “Unavoidably indisposed.” He turned the book round for the rest of the audience to see. “In these cases a quorum is established, as was done on the incarceration of Loram DeGaise. That Quorum will consist of five people, yourself included in that number, of course.” Lord Astrella nodded at Bonetti who didn't seem at all happy about the way this was going. “As ranking dignitaries, Ambassador Astrella and myself, have the authority to research into existing parliamentary and ranked Military records and it is our role to appoint such a quorum in the event of a crisis such as this.” Bonetti sat forward, prepared to pounce at the first mention of appointing Ben Astrella. That would be an irregularity, due to the family tie, obviously, and Bonetti was desperate enough to exploit it to the maximum. “The other four quorum members will be Honorary General Faust Cooper ...” Bonetti went white. “General Louis Marx ...” His colour improved slightly. “Captain Vespus Creed acting on behalf of, and with full and authorised documentation from, Leo Blacklock ...”

“What?!” Bonetti, Marx and quite a few other people got to their feet. “Sir I object!”

“Oh? On what grounds?” Lord Astrella had expected this, naturally.

“Because he is not of governmental or Military standing, Sir! He has no experience, authority or understanding of parliament at all!”

“None of which are pre-requisites to stand in office.” Lord Astrella offered Bonetti the tome to read, which he ignored completely. “The only stipulation made regarding the appointment of a civilian is that they are vouched for by another quorum member.”

“Faust Cooper is no referee, Sir, I do know that much. He's no longer retained in the Military nor in any governmental role.” Bonetti got straight into that one.

“Which brings me to the last elected member for the Crisis Quorum of Azoria.” Lord Astrella paused for affect. “Deputy Consultant Ambassador Ursus Vinter.”

“Sir I object! You cannot nominate your so ... Lady Toller?!” Bonetti squealed. “Sir you cannot be serious! This is hugely irregular and I'm sure it's not legal! She's ... a woman!”

“Your perspicacity is astounding Bonetti. I see no legal references to the male gender as exclusive claimants to these offices, not even references to 'men' or 'man'. I think you'll find that the word 'person' applies to Deputy Vinter, who has undertaken the responsibility of the aforementioned appointed civilian. Leo Blacklock.” Lord Astrella concluded.

“I intend to appeal against this shambles. Sir!” Bonetti shouted.

“You do that.” Lord Astrella said. “I'll give it my utmost attention when I receive it.”

“What about the gladiator girl?” Bonetti blurted and Lord Astrella rose his eyebrows at the Administrator. “She fits in this somewhere and I know it.” Bonetti saw he had the Lord's attention.

“You know what, exactly?” Lord Astrella said evenly.

“I know enough.” Bonetti licked his lips nervously as he bluffed his answer. “That she's in the favour of your son, General Astrella, for a start.” The rippled murmurs turned to squeals as Lord Astrella launched his sword and it stuck in the wooden table in front of Bonetti.

“Herz ...” Lily placed her hand on her husband's arm.

“Who my son has in favour, or who he doesn't, is not a subject for a parliamentary meeting. Do you understand me? If General Astrella is guilty of any misconduct at all, then that will now be dealt with by Faust Cooper, but as far as my son is concerned, you will keep your disrespectful gossip to the lowlife who would care to hear it.” Lord Astrella loomed over the entire meeting room. “Myself and Ambassador Astrella are at your disposal for as long as we are in Azoria so please don't hesitate to contact us if necessary. That concludes this session of parliament.” He sat back down and ended the discussions, definitely.

Lily decided to leave her her husband to his mood for a while. Even the silent journey back to the Villa hadn't lifted the scowl on his face. Lily tried to relax in her bath and reflect on Herz's very uncharacteristic outburst. It wasn't the first time that Ben's success with the girls had been mentioned in public, and in Herz's presence. Herz usually laughed it off in a proud, manly type manner. Was it because Bonetti brought it up in the presence of other women? The presence of his mother? Lily was fairly sure her name would have been used in the warning had the warning been given to protect her. Bonetti himself? Herz obviously didn't like the man at all, but Lily knew her husband would never be so unprofessional. Kore? Herz would never discriminate against a social class and never opine on his adult son's private life. She decided to go and face the man outright rather than give herself a headache speculating. He still had a thunderous expression on his face.

“Do you want me to send for Ben?” Lily asked in concern.

“No, it's fine Lily.” Herz sighed and his expression cleared slightly when he saw the worried look on his wife's lovely face. She was the most beautiful woman that Herz had ever seen, and she was as lovely now as she was twenty two years ago when he'd first seen her. It had been the social match of the year, as well as a perfect love match. Then it went wrong. Lily's maiden name of DeGaise became reviled across the empire and what was once the perfect match, swiftly became a gross mismatch. Herz fought verbally, mentally and physically in defence of his wife, and his marriage, and they both stood strong. He abhorred the short sighted bigotry that could judge an individual

according to their shared name with a lunatic. He was sickened by the 'guilt by association' reasoning and always would be. He had felt like aiming that sword straight through Bonetti when he displayed the same narrow-minded attitude that Herz had experienced, and loathed, so much. And there was more, much more. Bonetti was a blustering fool and Herz was in no doubt about that. He knew nothing at all about Kore and Leo Blacklock but he knew to press that particular button on Herz. "How's Kore today?"

"Physician Sillix says she's doing remarkably well. Apparently gladiators have different skin to the rest of us." Lily laughed, much relieved at her husband's improving frame of mind. "They heal twice as fast. Herz? I can see that you quite like Kore and that you obviously aren't adverse to her being here, but ... well ..."

"Her and Ben?" Herz helped. "Ben tells me they're friends."

"And Ben's body language and reactions tell me he's not going to settle for that." Lily said. "You know what I'm getting at Herz, does that bother you at all? Your reaction to it being mentioned was very unexpected."

"I know and I'm sorry. I apologised to Ursus too. No of course it doesn't bother me, you know better than that, not because she's a gladiator anyway." Herz exhaled loudly. "Ben says there are no pre-war records on the twins and I can well believe that. That means their life started when they were brought here to Azoria." Lily nodded. "Lily don't you recognise Kore at all? She doesn't remind you of anyone? Doesn't look familiar?"

"No, I don't think so." Lily said warily. She didn't like the feel of this conversation at all. "All I know is that she's obscenely beautiful and if her brother shares those looks as much as people say he does, then I think I'll start a harem." She tried to lighten the conversation somewhat. It didn't work.

"Lily I'm willing to bet everything I own that she's an Athula." Herz said. "I don't mean a descendent of an Athulan supporter, or sympathiser, or an innocent who just didn't happen to be DeGaise, I mean I bet she was born Athula, obviously Leo too."

"A direct relation?" Lily was very surprised indeed. "Not one of Guill's though. The poor man's entire family were killed. Are you sure?"

"No, not totally, I'm going on the evidence of my own eyes and nothing more. The Athula gene was so noticeable that it used to be a standing joke in pre-war days. You could spot one a mile off." Herz said. "I remember a full scale ... hunt ... being sanctioned to find Guill's sister. I'd have to refer to the library for names and so forth. She'd moved to Canuska for the summer to learn some sort of art trade, I don't fully remember. Loram DeGaise was jailed before the hunt was finished and it was aborted, obviously. I think it must have been presumed that she'd been caught among all the rest of them. I know nothing else of her at all, but it isn't beyond belief that she was a young married woman. As I said, I've only my own memory and my own recognition to go on here and neither are infallible."

"I'm presuming you're thinking of the potential panic factor of this, if the news is abused?" Lily asked and Herz nodded.

"And it's bound to be abused right now. How in hell no one else has noticed is beyond me. Or maybe they have and realised it's potential too and kept quiet. Why did Bonetti mention her?" Herz frowned. "He doesn't suspect who she is otherwise he'd be collecting the firewood for the bonfires."

Just to try and get a cheap shot in about Ben's personal life?"

"Even given his shock at the quorum announcement, he's still an Administrator and should be above such references, especially in an official meeting. Do you think Ben will manage to get Toller to Haggardan? I'm so very proud of him, Herz. I know his official reasons for that are to minimise the scandal but he also realises that a lot of what he's using is true. He was used and he was exploited, but many of his actions and thoughts were his own, his despicable treatment of Ursus, for example."

"If he goes about it properly, he'll get Toller to Haggardan and he'll ensure he stays there by letting Toller know exactly where he stands, that is, two steps from the hanging rope if he comes back." Herz said flatly. "Do we tell Ben about his girlfriend?"

"What about her?" Ben came walking through the door looking very pleased with everything. "And that's friend who is a girl, dad. She is OK isn't she?"

"Improving drastically." Lily assured him. "Jyp's still in there. He's been talking to her all the time Ben, he really is a loyal and noble man. He was telling her all about his farm on Nellatia and how the gulls once ate their entire corn crop. He was flapping all round the room in demonstration." She laughed.

"He's something else, isn't he?" Ben smiled. "He's bound to be exhausted. I'll go and see if I can persuade him to let me spell him off for a while."

Ben found Jyp asleep on the floor with a feather scarf of his mother's tied around his head. Kore still looked terrifyingly frail and battered, although a few of the superficial cuts and bruises were healing nicely. She looked so small lying in the expanse of the huge four poster bed among mountains of pillows and quilt-work. A bowl of pink coloured water with a few scraps of linen in it showed that Jyp had cleaned her wounds recently.

"Still asleep eh?" Ben sat on the edge of the bed. "I have no rural tales to tell you, like Jyp does and my pre-military life at home wasn't adventurous at all. I can tell you all about the state of the city though." Ben told Kore's unresponsive form of all the events since her sleep began and it made his own head reel to report it in a straight narrative form like this. His crowning piece of news was the announcement of Civic Administrator Leo Blacklock. "Kore you'll be so very proud of him, he's wonderful. He cried and cried when Ursus told him and his health has improved no end. He's already conducting official duties from his sick-bed via Vespus. He's kicked that ridiculous block hinge order to the gutter for a start. He outranks all the cadets and all the second grade Captains. It's just a pity that arsehole Pape wasn't still second grade then Leo could sack him." Ben smiled. "He's answerable to Ursus and enjoying that particular part of it all immensely, as is she. Faust took it upon himself to make Jyp an official body-guard, he created the position especially. I don't think Jyp's taken his armet off since. Jasmine is now more Deputy's Legal Clerk than she is call-girl and I think you've lost Shawn as your chief ogler and you're second to Jasmine." Ben rubbed Kore's hand. "Having said that, I think you lost Shawn as your chief ogler a while ago, Kore. He's second to me." He pushed a strand of hair away from a scratch on Kore's forehead. "Kore it's killing me to see you battered and bruised like this. My innards turned to water when I saw that abuse you went through in that arena and I know I'll never get used to that. I also know that the arena is your life and that's as much a part of you as your heart. If you ever decide that your days of battling are over, I'll always be here, just like I have been for ten years." He stood up and quietly stepped over Jyp, then left the room.

Chapter 18

“Good day!” A scrawny little man with long grey hair, dressed in leggings and star patterned stockings walked up behind Cadet Bowman, frightening the life out of him.

“Who in hell are you?” Bowman demanded.

“Oh you wouldn't want to know.” The old man squinted at the sky. “Nice day for it eh?”

“How in blue buggery did you get in here?” Bowman shoved the intruder towards the door with his arm. “Come on, out of it.”

“Certainly. Good day to you sir.” The man saluted the Cadet and strolled off down the Villa path.

Ben sat and listened to his parents, taking notice very carefully.

“I see.” He said after his father had finished speaking. “So you think that the likes of Bonetti and Marx will clutch at their skirts and scream 'Athula!' at the top of their lungs?”

“More than that, Ben, they'll go along the lines of the Pit being ran by an Athula, seeing she's the champion.” Lily added. “Don't you start shouting here, but there's also a very good chance of them hauling your association with Kore out in to the public eye and battering it all out of shape and dragging it through the mud.”

“They can all go to hell!” Ben said in outrage. “It won't work, mum. I know my family and upbringing is of a slightly higher profile than the average soldier but I'm still nowhere near important enough for anybugger to be bothered. I don't care! They'll all oo and ahh for a week or so then go back to being concerned with the mess their city is in. Quite rightly too in my opinion. They can try their best mum but it'll soon be seen for the blatant harassment of a person just because of a name. It's old.” Ben sat and fumed. How dare it even be theorised that his private life be but on display in such a way!

“Ben you're more important that you think to people who like to dig up statistics and speculate on them.” Herz said. “Her mother was called Athula ...”

“Her mother, yes, so that won't even be her damned name! Even if it was, they can't possibly damage the Military's name via my association with her. That's ridiculous.” Ben snapped.

“You'll mind your soldier's mouth in front of your mother.” Herz said sharply.

“I'm sorry, please excuse that, mum.” Ben sighed. “It doesn't make any difference, is all I'm saying. The name Athula doesn't inspire the same feeling of 'riot' just as the name DeGaise doesn't inspire 'tyrant', not to any effective extent.”

“How about an Athula-DeGaise combination?” Lily spoke up. “Does that inspire a feeling of a return to the emperor ruling days where the DeGaise were advised by the Athula? Two of the most

powerful families in the empire, Ben and I think our people have had enough of single source power sources. That's what will be played on."

"I must be tired, I just haven't followed this at all." Ben rubbed his eyes.

"That's because you're sitting there roaring instead of listening." Herz said bluntly. "The woman I married was called Lady Lily DeGaise. Now are you up to date? Yes I know you keep telling us that you're just friends but we've been around a bit longer than you have, Ben."

"That's ... fantastically far-fetched dad." Ben laughed uncertainly. "So the people of Azoria could be both anti DeGaise and and Athulan and still be on the same side as anti ... me and Kore?"

"Basically yes, although it's more the alliance of two symbols rather than the two people. The anti-duo Azorian population will need a leader. Guess who might humbly accept that role?"

"Bonetti, if he ever clicks this into place." Ben shook his head. "He hasn't done so far."

"He hasn't had the situations he has now and no need to make the associations. You, Kore, and his desire to Govern Azoria have never been on the same stage before." Lily reasoned. "Your father thinks his suspicions have been aroused."

"Oh?" Ben looked up sharply. "Any ideas ..."

"How did you get in here?" Rowan's voice sounded from outside the drawing room door.

"Through the front door. Well through the conservatory window. Did you know it was open?" Ben drew his sword and pulled the door open. "Bloody soldiers are everywhere."

"I believe you're trespassing. Rowan will escort you off the premises." Ben said menacingly to the scraggy little man in the hallway. "Rowan, inform whoever's at the door to bloody well secure the windows."

"Oh! You must be General Astrella!" The thin little man chuckled a laugh. "Is your mum in?"

"I beg your pardon?" Ben seethed. "Look, if you don't clear off I'll have you thrown in jail. Go away, you cretin, we're busy."

"Such a pretty woman, you know. Herz Astrella is a lucky bugger."

"I'll ignore your disrespectful familiarity that one last time. Either leave or I'll throw you off the grounds myself." Ben snarled.

"Disrespectful? Oh no! No I'd never be disrespectful! Hey, you're my first-cousin."

"OK you were warned." Ben sheathed his sword and picked the intruder clean off the floor by his clothing.

"You are! Fine way to treat family. Lily DeGaise is my cousin! Put me down!"

"Ben!" Herz appeared at the doorway. "Hell and damnation! Ben drag him in here, your mother's fainted." He grabbed the skinny visitor from Ben and threw him into the drawing room. Ben ran in after them and went straight to his mother.

“When my mother wakes up, you're in the cells for illegal entry with menacing intent!” Ben growled at their visitor, who was curled up in a ball under the writing desk. “Dad? At least slap him or something!” Herz was just standing there staring at the man. “Right, I've had enough of today, and everything in it.” Ben made a grab under the desk.

“Ben! Ben leave him. I don't know how in black hell you got here or what you want but I promise you, I'll slay you before you leave this room and no one will know any different, if your intent is to cause any further distress to anyone here. Lily!” Lily was starting to wake up. “Don't fret yourself. Trust me, he won't harm anyone.”

“Would anyone like to tell me what's going on?” Ben said in bewilderment. “How can he harm anyone anyway? He's as daft as a loon and no bigger than that plant pot!”

“OK get out of there and introduce yourself to my son.” Lily said firmly, taking a few deep breaths. “I'll horsewhip you myself if you keep up such a preposterous pretence!” The man unfolded himself from underneath the table and straightened his baggy black blouson.

“And I get the insanity label!” He shrugged. “I already did introduce myself. General Astrella, my name is Loram DeGaise and I am your mother's full cousin.” Ben sat down heavily on a chair.

“What is this? Bring on a breakdown for Ben Day? The Loram DeGaise? As in 'incarcerated up at the very heavily guarded palace' Loram DeGaise?”

“The very same.” Loram bowed courteously. “Don't blame your guard, General. I've had a lot of time on my hands in which to explore the convolution of long forgotten passages that riddle the houses of the nobility of Azoria. Most of them were to facilitate illicit affairs, did you know that?”

“You took a very big risk in coming here.” Herz said flatly. “Do you honestly think everyone's forgotten you?”

“Certainly not! I'm very memorable.” Loram sniffed. “The risk was warranted.”

“You've had many years worth of opportunities to contact Lily. Why now?” Herz asked suspiciously.

“I didn't contact Lily.” Loram pointed out. “Lily you let-down, fainting all over the place. I hear the government has done a bit of restructuring?”

“And how did you hear that?” Herz asked.

“Because I'm not deaf yet and Bonetti and Marx woke me up in my tunnel by bellowing and roaring about it.”

“Hang on!” Ben got to his feet. “You're a convicted criminal for shi ... er ... criminal. What has governmental structure to do with you? Absolutely nothing! I'm going to call the guard.”

“Well how rude!” Loram exclaimed. “I just want to know if Bonetti is still the government treasurer!” He handed a handful of papers to Herz. “Are these still correct?” They were the channelled transfer forms for money and assets from the DeGaise estate to the parliament coffers, via every rout imaginable, but ultimately endorsed by Bonetti. Herz went purple in pure anger. “I don't get many visitors, you understand, so Bonetti and Marx were the only people I could ask legitimately and I don't think they'd have told me. Do you?” Loram prattled on as Ben also looked

over the papers with Lily.

“Loram there has been millions transferred over in the last decade.” Lily said in shock. “Did you never realise that there was nothing to show for it? I know your senses have been impaired over the years, but not to the extent you portray.”

“I told you he was a lucky bugger.” Loram said to Ben, nodding at Herz. “Oh my lovely, lovely, cousin of course there was something to show for it.” He sighed. “The fact that I was alive every day. I funded peace keeping measures and personal security measures of every sort. I lay awake at night, terrified in case I'd not paid enough and an Athulan gladiator was going to spring through my window and slit my throat. I took the skin from my hands trying to climb to the balconies to see if the defences were built to keep the advancing rebels controlled. I signed transfers to pay for journeys and conferences to and with your own governments in Tibrae to help protect Azoria from another War. I paid for the rebuilding of all three bridges when they were destroyed by Athulan gladiator anarchists, not twelve months ago. My sanity suffered due to my original crimes, fair cousin, I'd lose what little grip I have on reality altogether where I to allow my mistakes to be repeated.”

“Your insanity was exploited.” Ben said angrily. “What made you realise?”

“The chance evidence of my own eyes, something I don't get a lot of opportunity for as a prisoner. I saw for myself that a rift between the Military, and therefore the government, and the gladiators, simply did not exist. I saw the revolt and the offence and the confusion when I suggested that it did. Most of all, I was shown understanding and patience by the very person who was supposed to butcher me on sight for so many reasons. Kore Athula, and trust me, the resemblance is astonishing, is the gladiator champion. According to what I was lead to believe, there are three reasons in that one sentence why I shouldn't be alive. As well as that, she was in a government building in the company of a friend, an Azorian soldier. Not a guard, or even an escort, but a friend. Rumney or something.”

“Lumni. That must have been just before I arrived to receive my parents. You were in the side library?” Ben asked in surprise. “How?”

“Oh check it out sometime.” Loram smiled. “Handsome lad you have here Lily. He's like you, Herz.”

“Yes he is.” Herz agreed. “Loram you'll have to promise us that you won't use your tunnels. I'll have to use these documents to nail Bonetti's arse to the wall and that won't make you his favourite person. I'll see to it that neither him, nor his vultures, are allowed near the palace, nor the buildings connected to it by these tunnels, but you must tell me where these tunnels lead to. I'm sure you're sick of hearing this, but this time it really is for your own safety.”

“Yes I am sick of hearing it, but not from you. You're family.” Loram grinned at the expression on Herz's face. “Just the Ambassadorial Villa. There were two that lead here at one time but they collapsed a few years ago. I honestly expected Faust Cooper to investigate those collapses and discover that they were tunnels rather than stone support collapses. I later found out that he'd retired.” Loram shrugged. “Three to the Ambassadorial Villa. One to the upstairs storage area, that's the only one Bonetti et al are aware of and they have the storage room locked. One to the side library, as I've just told you. That's my favourite one.” He pouted. “I like books. I couldn't believe my ears when I was told I'd torn down a library! Silly old toad I am. Oh yes, the third passage leads to the wine cellar which has alleviated many weeks of boredom for me.”

“Are you sure there are no more?” Herz asked seriously. “It's very important Loram.”

“Quite sure.” Loram nodded. “Oh that top paper there isn't supposed to be in those archives.” He went to snatch the paper from Ben and Ben moved out of the way and started reading it. “It isn't complete because I didn't know who the wretched treasure was after your shake-up.” Loram explained.

“Loram this is a nonsense.” Ben pointed to the paper. “It can't be endorsed, no matter who the treasurer is. From now on, your state of mental health will be taken into account for transactions. We'll get you an advisor if necessary.”

“Have I filled it out wrong?” Loram looked confused.

“No, not as such. Loram you can't just sign away this amount of wealth without advice.” Ben handed the paper to his parents. “You were taken advantage of up to now, you should never have been allowed to transfer such huge sums without advice. That's probably just about all your remaining estate.”

“It's ninety two percent of it.” Loram nodded. “I thought it prudent to keep a small nest egg. OK so who'll advise me? It is mine, you know and it's bugger all use to me is it?”

“Why turn it over in that way? What use do you imagine it would be there?” Herz asked in shock.

“Maybe none at all but at least it won't be used for destructive purposes. I did think about signing the lot of it over to the brothel just for the laugh. I'll leave it with you shall I? You know where to find me if you need advisers, physicians, and whoever else to probe into my lucid bits.” Loram headed for the door. “Er ... am I likely to be apprehended on sight?”

“Huh?” Ben glanced from the papers. “Oh! Well yes, I'd have thought so. You tiresome man.” He marched into his mother's bathroom and returned with a linen laundry bag. “In.” he ordered and Loram whooped in delight and scrambled into the bag. “You dare make silly sounds and I'll dump you in the Lake.”

Lily tried to stand up and found that her legs were shaking.

“I've spent years losing that name, Herz, now he's roaming about the place chattering on about family ties.”

“He isn't roaming anywhere Lily, don't worry. His insanity is more in the category of 'egocentric', than it is 'raving lunatic' which means he's not stupid. The risk in leaving his prison and coming here was enormous and he knew it. He's reasoned it for himself Lily and that shows a certain degree of sanity. He knows full well that any funds he hands over to Bonetti could very well start the war they're telling him it will prevent. Bastards they are.” Herz picked up the incomplete paper that Loram had purposely drawn their attention to. “If this transfer gets the go ahead, I'd like to see Bonetti get this beneficiary to cough up. Some sort of guilt motivated compensation?”

“Most definitely.” Lily agreed. “Over ninety percent! Herz that will make Kore the wealthiest woman in Azoria.”

Faust Cooper sat with a grin as wide as one of the Quarter bridges in the spacious foyer of the brothel, together with the rest of the government quorum. He informed the quorum that he'd chosen this venue as a neutral, but comfortable and hospitable environment for their first independent convention. In reality, he'd chosen it to embarrass Bonetti, who wouldn't usually be seen dead in the place.

“OK!” Faust beamed brightly. “Treasury and expenditure. Bonetti, you're sacked. Next subject ...”

“I beg your pardon?” Bonetti jumped to his feet.

“Relieved as the governmental treasurer.” Faust clarified. “Replaced by Civic Administrator Blacklock.”

“You cannot do that!” Bonetti laughed in astonishment. “You do not run this quorum, Faust, the whole point of it is for the sake democracy, is it not?”

“The whole point of it is to ensure that no single person has the authority to make national decisions without the backing of the others, especially if they ultimately effect the expenditure of the Azorian people.” Faust lectured. “Leo has trashed your ludicrous figures Bonetti. There aren't two that tally, let alone the rest of them.”

“Withdrawals from the government coffers put down as non-itemised expenses.” Creed commented. “The amounts withdrawn are way above the level that exempt an itemised entry.”

“Is that it?” Bonetti said incredulously. “You cannot relieve a man of his position on such a flimsy detail.”

“We can. It's called embezzlement.” Ustrus informed him. “I also have numerous transfer bonds here, Administrator Bonetti, all to the government treasury, none of them logged in the treasury tomes.” Bonetti's colour drained and he looked at General Marx.

“You made copies?!” He spluttered at Marx.

“Of course I didn't!” Marx said defensively. “Those are obviously forged documents.”

“They're very well forged in that case.” Ursus commented. “They match up exactly with outgoing sums from a supposedly frozen estate, an impounded estate.”

“Where did you get those papers?” Bonetti snarled. “I can easily explain every one of them if you'd let me study them.”

“You jest?” Faust bellowed. “You want them studied, you do so in the presence of the quorum. Would you like to start with this one?” He took a paper from the pile at random. “The cost of horses, supplies, expenses for a sector of twelve men to be lead by Administrator Bonetti and ... oh! What have we here? ... General Faust Cooper! Damn my memory eh? It was only seven years ago too. We went to Tibrae? Did we? To attend a peace keeping conference hosted by Lord and Lady Astrella that lasted ten days. Oh look Ursus! The Tibraen government dispatched seventy men to guard and patrol the Pit and a further thirty to guard the palace! See? This transfer paid for the trip, the conference and the Tibraen guard. The Tibraens must be shit hot at stealth and camouflage, Bonetti, no bugger here's ever seen them! Here's one covering the cost of eighteen block hinges to repair Quarter One bridge. Umm, that's odd. It must have fell over and got fixed up pretty quickly seeing as I use the damned thing every day. Shipment of one hundred Athula anarchists to Killiean? When was that? I must have missed it ... let me see ... ah yes, it was during my retirement, in fact it was four weeks ago. Trial of six gladiator trainers? Oo they were convicted too which incurred the expense of building a separate secure facility to house the buggers in. So secure that we can't find the building at all eh Bonetti?”

“Those were never intended as transfer proposals.” Bonetti tried to argue. “They were budgeting exercises and meant as theoretical teaching aids to illustrate the expenses incurred in war times.”

“So the transfers were theoretical too? I can tell you they were not. That total there ...” Faust pointed to yet another document. “Minus that amount there, equals that total there. If you minus that next amount from that total, you get this total. Those amounts went out of that account Bonetti, and they were split and directed all over Azoria. The block hinge transfer was split six ways, to various businesses across the city. Every one of those businesses had records of equal sums to those splits all endorsed by you as government subsidies. Those same businesses have documented outgoings that when combined, reach the exact same amount that was originally transferred and that re-accumulated sum was filtered through the government treasury and withdrawn, as non-itemised expenses, constantly, over a long period of time. Quite a system going on there. It works out as two such withdrawals every week, on average. As soon as these bi-weekly amounts had to lessen because one transfer was spent, you simply put in a request for another transfer. You look ill, Administrator Bonetti.” Faust glared holes through the Administrator. Himself, a hoard of Cadets and a lot of patience and co-ordination had turned up all this in a remarkably short space of time. The whole operation had gone from Leo in his sickbed, to Creed, to Faust and his Cadets, more legwork than Faust had thought physically possible, then back through the chain with the results for Leo to plough through. Faust's back was playing him up in a diabolical manner just now and Bonetti was right in the firing line of everything. “We have frozen three more transfers in mid-transit, pending the acceptance of a successive beneficiary of the impounded estate you've been extorting.” Faust said quietly. Bonetti took a full five minutes to digest and translate this.

“Successive beneficiary?” He said at last. “Now I know you're talking shit, Faust. You have nothing and you know it. Successive beneficiary?” He laughed. “It wasn't the estate that was frozen, you old fool! It could no longer be operated under the name of DeGaise and seeing as Loram had no children, and was not in sound mind, no successive beneficiary could be appointed! Nice try Faust, you had me thinking for a few minutes there, I admit.”

“I'd like to submit this report from physician Sillix.” Creed put a document on the table. “Loram DeGaise is described as an institutionalised, paranoid depressive. Sillix states that the condition is contributed to by his unavoidable isolation and hits him in bouts.”

“I'm not a medical man, Creed. Am I right in thinking that Loram DeGaise has actually improved, from a sanity point of view? He was a dangerous psychopath on his incarceration, wasn't he?” Faust asked.

“I'm not a medical man either.” Creed said. “Because of this, I questioned the physician myself, for my own understanding. DeGaise was reported as dangerous and psychotic when he was jailed. It was the power and adulation that directly fuelled his condition. His years in isolation have obviously removed his fuel. He's still classed as mentally impaired but he'd be officially 'downgraded' to an institutionalised misfit if two other physicians from Canuska and Tibrae reach the same conclusion as Sillix has, independently. Under guidance and impartial advice Sillix believes that there is no reason at all why DeGaise shouldn't appoint a successive beneficiary to his estate, in fact he thought it a very wise move indeed, given his, still present, fits of depression and paranoia.”

“So you intend to revise a post war treaty law regarding the DeGaise name?” Bonetti said in amusement. “You are seriously considering activating that account to a DeGaise once more? My dear General, I often wonder which side you're on.”

“Ursus, correct me if I'm wrong, but does the treaty say that appointed beneficiaries must be of a blood tie? Does it stipulate that any beneficiaries appointed by Loram DeGaise must be named

DeGaise?" Faust asked.

"It was looked into very deeply, and just thirty minutes ago I received a message from the library in Tibrae where the original treaty is kept. It states nowhere that a successor must be DeGaise. If Loram DeGaise is declared sane enough to make that decision, then he can appoint the brothel cat as his successor if he pleases." Ursus shrugged. "It's generally believed that it was left that way on the off chance that he could be persuaded to turn the lot over to the government. It's just as well that treaty is in Tibrae and not here, isn't it Bonetti?"

"I demand to know who this successor is! A DeGaise would not turn over his estate to anyone other than a DeGaise!" Bonetti exploded.

"You aren't in a position to demand anything." Faust snapped. "Your position here was terminated at the onset of this meeting! As for prosecution procedures, well that will be up to the beneficiary to the DeGaise estate when these serious discrepancies are discovered."

"All the more reason for you to tell me who it is. I'll find out anyway." Bonetti said stubbornly.

"You don't get it, do you? You're finished, done with, no longer part of the gang. Any current situations you are dealing with will be passed on to General Marx." Bonetti's eyes lit up.

"I'm replacing Administrator Bonetti?" Marx said in shock.

"In the position in which he was last retained here. Before he was thrown out altogether, the embezzlement alone had him banged down to second Captain."

"What?" Marx exclaimed. "But I'm a General already! I'm being demoted? Why?"

"Not a Military demotion, Marx, but a governmental reshuffle. You'd be directly responsible to Leo Blacklock. Won't that be nice?" Faust smiled falsely.

"No it certainly will not! This is outrageous! It's Bonetti who's in the shit, not me!" Marx banged his hands on the table and Bonetti almost choked then glowered at his treacherous General.

"Three complimentary lever hinged deadlocks." Creed mused. "Purchased from Hessod's ironmongers and paid for by government expenses, the only one you seemed to have itemised, ironically enough, signed for by General Louis Marx."

"So? Three deadlocks? They could have been for the parliament middens for all you know!" Marx shouted.

"No, I checked." Creed said evenly. "In fact I checked every government retained building plus any properties owned by yourself. I found all three deadlocks on the same door, in the Ambassadorial Villa, on an upstairs storage room. Do I need elaborate?"

"Those locks that Administrator Bonetti had me purchase?" Marx edged away from Bonetti, who went a livid purple colour.

"Possibly." Creed said. "But you have a set of keys for them in your barracks locker, or at least you did."

"You searched my property! I outrank you in the Military, Creed!" Marx bellowed.

“You don't outrank me though.” Faust shrugged. “I didn't even need a warrant, seeing as Pape was already in your locker. He told me he was looking for his shift sheets.”

“Pape! The little shit!” Marx almost sobbed.

“Oh don't worry, Marx. I had him arrested for unauthorised entry to a General's barracks. See how I look after my soldiers?” Faust smiled. “Last I heard he was telling Cadet Roscus how you and Bonetti gave him gifts of jewellery and art paintings.”

“We did no such thing!” Marx yelled and Bonetti covered his face with his hand. “Any property from the palace found on him, he appropriated himself!”

“Oh, you've seen them? Saves me the job of describing them to you.” Faust shrugged and Marx cringed, realising his mistake. “So! Where are we now? Bonetti, you're out. Marx, you're assistant treasury officer, as well as secondary military advisor to myself. Pape seems interested in a position in Haggardan with Toller. Guard rotas are currently being re-arranged by General Astrella regarding the Ambassadorial Villa, and the palace. A full review of Loram DeGaise's prison conditions is to be started shortly and a full review of the state of his head is already under way. Civic Administrator Blacklock's health is improving dramatically, isn't that good news Marx? Deputy Vinter and Clerk Jasmine Julius are making remarkable progress with their citizens' consultancy establishment and Lady Blanche has kindly offered us the use of her foyer, at a reduced rate, any time we need it. I think that covers the main stuff.” Faust rubbed his hands together and felt pleased with the meeting's events. “Ursus?”

“The first priority in my area is to ensure that the businesses and trades in Azoria are allowed to select employees based on their ability to do the job, not on where they live. I've put in a proposal to make it illegal to stipulate 'No Pit-dwellers' or 'No former Gladiators.' Hopefully, anyone found encouraging such discrimination will be formally charged in the future. The gladiators are to be regarded as athletes, sports persons, which is exactly what those that want to be, are.”

“Security and safety laws regarding the arena are to be revised, under the supervision of General Astrella.” Creed told them. “The use of beasts in there is one of the first reforms to be addressed, as is deviations from the schedules set out by the overseers and trainers. It's a voluntary sport and Deputy Vinter is correct, those gladiators are athletes. The Pit will be subject to the same treatment, and the same laws, as the rest of Azoria.”

“They like it that way.” Marx spat. “Haven't you realised that yet? They live in that slum and keep it a slum.”

“Oh, are you still here?” Faust yawned. “Well if I lived there, I'd be buggered if I was going to do the place up for arses like you refuse them the means to maintain it. They've no water supply half the time and no lighting any of the time! The last path they built was to the ale house and you lot pulled all the stones up a week later to use as a foundation for that ugly fountain in the parliament gardens! You'll find that those people won't object to a fair tax if they're getting a fair deal from it.”

“That would be back-tax.” Bonetti chipped in. “That lot haven't paid anything towards anything. I told you, I intend to make waves.”

“Good point.” Faust said. “That would be your department, Marx. You could mention back taxing the gladiators for the last ten years to your boss, Leo Blacklock.” Marx stood up and stormed from the room. Faust bellowed a laugh.

“This is ... wrong ... Faust. Just ... wrong.” Bonetti said darkly. “You are a bunch of novices playing with Azoria's economy. Even with the Astrellas' advice, you're all still clueless.”

“I'd rather be clueless than jobless. Piss off.” Faust said childishly. It worked. Bonetti simply couldn't retort to such an inane comment and he strode out of the foyer. “I think that concludes that!”

Chapter 19

Faust gave his report of their quorum meeting to Lord and Ambassador Astrella with his mile wide grin still in place, despite his twinging back.

“I think it went rather well. I can't think of anything that wasn't conducted accordingly.”

“Me either.” Herz barked a laugh. “Nice venue, for a start. 'In conclusion, Bonetti was dismissed with the words 'piss off.' Very explanatory.” Herz smirked at Faust and Lily rolled her eyes.

“I'm pleased Ursus was there to add some sanity.”

“Pfft! That's only because she wrote out those minutes! Making herself look good.” Faust sniffed. “Where's Ben? I can't wait to tell him about all this.”

“He's in there with Kore, he's been in there for hours, Faust, I feel for him.” Lily said in sympathy.

“It can't be easy for him to just sit there while she's so sick. He lost her once before.” Faust said. “In the months just after we found them, obviously it came up in private conversation, but the look of grief on his face was enough to cut the subject short every time. I'll knock before I go in.”

Faust found Jyp asleep on the floor next to the bed, and Ben asleep over the bed, sitting on a chair. He looked exhausted and Faust knew he'd been spending all of his off-duty time, and quite a bit of his on-duty times, right here worrying. Kore's stitches had been removed and all the surface bruising had gone. Her arrow wound had left her with an angry looking star shaped scar, but Sillix had made an excellent job of repairing it. The ribs and other dislocations were still supported but they too, were healing well, and healing straight. Faust smiled when he saw a hairbrush in Ben's hand where his sword usually was and the tell-tale blonde hairs in it meant it hadn't been used on Ben's own black hair.

“Big soft wench.” Faust whispered. “I'll come back later.”

“No need Faust, you have a tread like a war-elephant.” Ben sat up stiffly and rubbed his eyes. Jyp also woke up and tried to get closer to Kore than Ben was. “I presume the meeting went well?” Faust's grin remained intact as he nodded his head and proudly handed Ben his meeting minutes. “Piss off.” Ben started to laugh. “Very official.”

“It worked. Jyp, you're invited to the next one, my friend. I'm thinking Bonetti and Marx, might discover who Loram DeGaise's sole beneficiary is and they could have a few unkind things to say about the Little Lady.”

“Oh? Jyp taking sword.” Jyp began his routine of gently washing Kore's now almost non existent wounds.

“Yes and I'll eavesdrop with mine.” Ben agreed. “They'll get more than unkind if I overhear it. I'll do it Jyp.” Jyp was trying to get the hairbrush from Ben.

“Why do I have a heap of noisy men in my room?” Kore croaked and all three men crowded round the bedside.

“Kore!” They all shouted at once, thus alerting Lord and Ambassador Astrella too.

“In fact, why do I have another room in my room?” Kore squinted against the light at the plus surroundings she was in.

“You're in my bed.” Ben smiled.

“Try harder, it didn't even wake me. Ouch!” Kore tried to sit up and every part of her body ached and burned. “The arrow.”

“Jyp have throwded it onto fire.” Jyp was hopping from one foot to the other, trying his best not to grab Kore and crush the wind from her with a hug. “With this arm.” He flexed his right arm in front of him. “Special arm. Little Lady see?”

“Military?” Kore laughed in surprise. “I thought you said they could go and jump?”

“Is special, as Jyp said, not ... common ... soldier.”

“Kore!” Lily Astrella darted over, sending Kore into a panic, more so when she saw the huge frame of Lord Astrella in the doorway. “Cadet Rowan has gone for physician Sillix.”

“Leo!” Kore made the connection between the physician and her brother. “Jyp, help me up, I have to ...”

“I don't think so.” Ben sat on the edge of the bed. “Kore he's fine, more than fine. If Sillix gives you the OK then we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“But Leo ...”

“He's OK Kore. We wouldn't tell you any differently.” Faust told her. “He's still resting in the infirmary, but he's absolutely fine, as you'll find out soon. Ah, physician Sillix.”

“Tell him I'm awake and I'll be over to see him later!” Kore shouted as everyone else left. “And Shawn and Blacklock! Jasmine! Tell Jasmine I'm OK ... oof!” Sillix had wedged her back into her pillows. “OK I'll sit still. How long have I been here?”

“Five weeks. Stop wriggling, Kore.”

“Five weeks?! You jest? Five pissing weeks?! Physician Sillix, fix whatever that is that's hurting down there, I have to go! Ben! Get back in here. Ben!” Kore howled.

“Kore, I'll sedate you if you don't settle down!” Sillix barked. Ben came back into the room. “Please stay, General Astrella, she's getting hysterical.”

“I am not!” Kore said hysterically. “OK! I'm OK, don't glare at me.” She sulked. “Just ... hurry up. Please? Ben! I have something very important to tell you. It's about the Ambassadorial side library. It needs ... renovated.”

“I know. Shush Kore, we know all about it and it's bizarre wall structure. Like I said, we have a lot

to tell you but not if physician Sillix thinks you're going to get worked up.” Ben said and Kore glanced at Sillix and tried to sit still. “Jyp's never moved from this very spot, Kore. He's slept right on the floor here.”

“He's wonderful isn't he?” Kore smiled. “Whatever you have him doing for the Military will be great for him Ben, thanks. He deserves to feel valued.”

“Well Faust gave the actual position to him, I seconded it totally. He's a regiment retained personal security guard. He's now getting paid to do what he's done since he met you.” Ben laughed. “So how has your handiwork fared, physician Sillix?”

“Any handiwork would fare well on a body like this.” Sillix said officiously.

“I couldn't agree more.” Ben smirked at Kore who tried to get the billowing nightdress she'd been draped in, to drape in a more seemly manner. “So is she OK for a room full of visitors?”

“For an hour only. I'll leave orders with Ambassador Astrella that it has to be no longer. Kore, you are not to leave this bed. Do you understand me? I mean it. I'll have you in the infirmary and supervised constantly if you even try. General Astrella? No excitement.”

“For me? Oh, I see what you mean.” Ben winked at Kore who snorted a laugh. “We won't let her get over-heated, don't worry.”

“Physician Sillix? Will you please tell my brother I'm OK?” Kore begged. “We've never been apart for five hours, let alone five weeks.” Her lip wobbled and she tried so hard to look tough to prevent it doing so.

“Of course.” Sillix said. “He's doing very well himself, it must be a family thing. He's hoping to be entertaining his lady for his birthday next month.” He laughed and left the chamber.

“His what?” Kore frowned after the physician. “Who? I thought he was ill?”

“All in good time, Kore, I promise.” Ben assured her. “Twenty one in four weeks and three days. Yes?” Kore nodded. “If you've finished lazing about in here by then, we could try a different room. Dining room? Or if not, we'll go out to dinner right here.”

“I'll probably be a part of this bed by then. Yes, thank you, I'd like that.” Kore nodded. “I may have to borrow either another gown or a nightdress from Jasmine though.” She wafted a sleeve at Ben and caused a draught.

“It is a bit voluminous isn't it? My mother says it's hers but I rather think it would fit the old boy. No matter, you still look stunning.” Ben complimented at Kore felt herself going red, not a very common occurrence. “Kore I've never been as scared in all my life as I've been these past few weeks.” Ben exhaled loudly. “I'm surprised Sillix hasn't arranged for me to be beat up. I kept panicking every few hours and hauling the poor man in, day and night.” He smiled. “Faust called me a big soft fanny.”

“It must be a man thing, Jyp's as bad and Leo's at least ten fannies worth.”

“I don't think Jyp, or even Leo, have quite the same outlook as I do. Kore will ...”

“All fixed up eh?” Faust boomed from the door.

“Not quite.” Ben muttered and stood up. “I think we're going to need more chairs.”

Lord and Lady Astrella, Ben, Faust, Creed, Ursus, Jyp, Blacklock, Shawn, Jasmine and even cadets Rowan, Lumni and Roscus all crammed into the bed chamber and Kore had to be glared back into her pillows when she tried to scramble out of them in excitement.

“Who's going to start?” She asked eagerly. “Get on with it! I'm going to tell Sillix you're all stressing me out! I remember seeing Ben running towards me at the arena where I was with Jasmine, then nothing until Ben and Jyp were fighting over the hairbrush. Fannies.”

Ben started by telling Kore how he carried her to the guest Villa, then everyone else had a part in relating the events and occurrences that had taken place, right up to that morning's meeting. The silence that followed was deafening. The last piece of news imparted was Kore's appointment as sole beneficiary to ninety two per cent of the DeGaise estate.

“Er ... I want to see Leo.” Kore said eventually. “I can't ... do ... that on my own. I need Leo.”

“He's the government treasurer, Kore, of course you need Leo.” Lily smiled. “There's no mad rush and neither of you are in a position, or a condition, for a personal meeting. The estate is frozen until you're ready and well enough to handle it, with as many advisers and helpers as you need.”

“I'll have to buy Jasmine some new shoes. I got something unpleasant on the last ones and it wouldn't come off.” Kore said seriously, but irrationally. Ninety two percent of ... more than Kore could even imagine. It terrified her.

“Kore you could buy her the whole bloody shoe shop!” Shawn laughed and relieved the tension.

“The arena! Ben can I buy the arena?” Kore asked eagerly. “And the Pit? I'll build middens.”

“Slow down!” Ben laughed. “This is what your advisers are for, namely, Leo.”

“Ursus!” Kore shrieked. “What have you done to my brother?” She laughed.

“Nothing yet, he's still in the infirmary.” Ursus replied.

“Well are you going to marry him? Has he asked you? Ask him, he's clueless. I'll pay for that too! Tell him he can't faff and fuss over me anymore. You get that honour now, see how you like it. Hey who does all the marrying now? Bah! We need a new governor Ben, for shi ... goodness sake. Who can we have?” Kore prattled on.

“Kore, that'll be sorted in time.” Ben shook his head. “Don't get yourself in a knot with matters political, you're a gladiator.”

“Well I vote for Ursus.” Kore said firmly.

“Governors aren't female.” Lord Astrella laughed.

“Governess then. I bet Ambassador Astrella agrees with me.” Kore grinned.

“Absolutely.” Lily nodded.

“Same here.” Faust agreed. “I don't think Leo would object either.” He laughed.

“Still no good. How Lady Ursus marry self?” Jyp asked in confusion. “If Lady Ursus is Govness then must making Deputy one too otherwise all is titsup.”

“Anyone in mind, Jyp?” Ben asked, smiling at Kore.

“As happens, yes indeed.” Jyp nodded. “Captain Soldier.”

“Me?” Ben started to laugh. “Oh I don't know about that Jyp, I'm not a politician.”

“Little Lady not too, her is too foul in temper.” Jyp said knowingly and Kore looked rather offended. “Oh well, Lady Govness Ursus sorting own buddies about. Allbodies must be going now, physician Sillix have saying so.” Jyp stood up and waved his armlet arm about.

“Jyp I'm OK!” Kore objected.

“Jyp not give rat's arse. Home time peoples.”

“Jyp!” Kore exclaimed. “For shit's sake. I'm sorry about his language, he spends too much time in the company of ... of ... Blacklock. Can Ben stay? Yes he can Jyp, stop being Leoish.” Everyone else bade their farewells to Kore and Jyp decided to sit on the outside of the door.

“Are you OK?” Ben asked the bewildered gladiator.

“Am I hell!” Kore blurted. “Calm! Yes I am calm. I am! Ben do you know who my parents are? I can't even remember their names. Just Mum telling us about Dad. I won't be called Athula, will I?”

“As far as the library in Tibrae can tell us, your mother was Guill's sister, Gaia. My parents intend to look into it all a bit deeper when they get back to Tibrae.” Ben saw the lost look on Kore's face that he'd only seen a few times before. “Gaia Athula married an Azorian Captain called Eonos Cooper, Kore that was Faust's brother. He had no idea at all until my father told him, it was a big shock to him, as it is to you. Faust was told that his brother was killed in the line of duty, Faust himself, was contracted to the Tibraen Military at that time. The name Cooper is a very common name so no pass was ever put on that by the scholars in the library in Tibrae. My mother insisted they follow it up, just as a million to one chance hunch she had. They found records of your parents marriage, conducted here in Azoria, only two months before you and Leo were born. No records were ever made of your birth, due to the war and the shameful amount of documentation that was destroyed. Faust does intend to speak with you about this. I think he's eager to make a memorial of some sort in Eonos' honour. Obviously he needs to talk to you too.” Ben chewed on his lip as he watched Kore's face go through every expression known to man. “Leo knows. He also wants to talk to you about it, obviously.”

“Faust is my uncle?” Kore blinked but the tears still came. “Me and Leo have an uncle?” Ben nodded. “Was my mum a Lady? I mean the title?”

“Yes she was Kore. Lady Gaia Athula. It was an honorary title given to Guill and his siblings by Hap DeGaise, Loram's father.”

“So ... so ... what am I called?” Kore asked pathetically. “Who am I?”

“You're Kore the gladiator, Kore the twin, Kore, Leo's sister, Jyp's Little Lady. Just the same as Leo is Kore's brother, Leo the twin, and Leo the librarian. Kore you are exactly who you were before all this and a name isn't going to change it.”

"I'm Kore Blacklock." Kore said in a daze. "I've always been Kore Blacklock."

"There you go then." Ben laughed. "You want to know why I'm not surprised? Leo told us he was still Leo Blacklock and not a lot could change that, with the exception of you. If you'd gone for another name, he'd have followed suit. I'm pleased you didn't, I saw what it meant to Blacklock by the tears in his eyes." Ben held Kore's hand. "I don't think Leo would follow suit if you wanted to add 'Astrella' to the end of yours." He said quietly. Kore yelped and almost fell off the bed.

"Eh?" She blurted.

"You heard! Blacklock-Astrella. Will you marry me?" Ben said simply.

"I'll have to raid Jasmine's wardrobe."

"Yes! Wooooooo!" Ben yelled. "You'll ... what? Kore you will so not raid Jasmine's wardrobe! Ninety two percent? Remember?"

"That's for important stuff!" Kore said. "Azorianish type things."

"Important? Marrying me isn't important? Well I think it is." Ben sniffed when he saw the smirk on Kore's face. "I've already asked Dresk to hose down the ale house."

"Dresk's?! We can't go there! I'll get Jasmine's dress all muddy wandering through the Pit lanes. Although I'll go beforehand and invite all the customers, and Dresk."

The single, biggest, step towards rectifying Azoria's history lasted as long as the War that threw it into such a downward spiral. Some say it's an ongoing process, as the room for improvement is infinite.

"Can we go and see uncle Faust while we're waiting?" Gaia asked, turning her huge blue eyes into a puppy-dog expression.

"Umm no. We'll just go and wait where we're supposed to wait." Ben lead Gaia and Guill, her brother, past the ex-brothel that was now used as a 'community forum' but still had it's original occupational role intact, discretely, and towards the parliament building. Gaia and Guill were as alike as Kore and Leo, despite their genders, and they were both exactly like the senior twins, something that poor Faust was still freaked out by. "I'm sure they won't be long, these emergency meetings are a nuisance eh?" Ben sat outside the guarded chambers with the twins.

"We won't miss Kore will we?" Guill asked. Kore Blacklock-Astrella was the senior trainer in the arena, although Blacklock would be there, in some capacity or another, until his days were over. Obviously Gaia and Guill weren't allowed into the arena, but they always went to see their famous aunt before she left to oversee the events. Military Masrshall Ben Astrella had been called in on emergency child-minding duty after a burst reservoir in the Pit had pulled both their parents into a meeting, a job that Ben didn't mind in the slightest. Governess Ursus Vinter-Blacklock would have it all in hand in no time and her husband, Treasury Administrator Leo Blacklock would have the budgets rearranged before they left the building. Kore had made sure that the birth of her nephew and niece had bee announced all over the entire empire and she loved them both so very much. Her and Ben remained childless.

“Kore wouldn't go in the arena without seeing you two first. She'll be in the bakery house, like she promised.” Ben assured his nephew and niece. “I hear Jyp took you to visit Mr. Loram yesterday?” Literally, Jyp had become the twins' most favoured mode of transport. Loram was still at the palace and still imprisoned, nothing would ever change that, but the isolation was deemed too barbaric. Loram was allowed supervised visits from just about anyone, providing they cleared it with Captains Lumni and Rowan first. General Vespus Creed ran the security of the place, as well as being divisional General of Quarter Three.

“Yes!” Gaia squealed. “He showed us magic tricks! Then we played charades. He's very good at it.” Ben nodded. Of course he was! Most of the man's life had been a charade, and probably always would be. “Daddy said that Shawn was doing a hexhibition today.”

“Is he? Well that's what arena champs do. Your auntie Kore did hundreds!” Ben nodded.

“Yes and my dad fanned. That's what she said.” Guill said seriously and Ben winced. He made a mental note to tell his wife to look who was in earshot before she used gladiator-speak. “Jasmine fannies too though, I've heard her. She said she was going to tie bosom pads on all the swords. What's bosom pads?”

“Umm ... I'm not sure. Maybe you should ask your dad. Here he is now.” Ben was relieved to see Leo, thus sparing him from having to answer that one. “All sorted?” He asked as the children ran to their father.

“Not as catastrophic as it seemed. Blacklock had the area fenced off before he'd even told us, so no patrols are needed, just the construction lot. Hey! You Two!” Leo lifted up his children. “You been good?” Both nodded their silver blond-haired heads.

“They always are.” Ben said.

“Ah your time will come Ben.” Leo actually felt sorry for Ben, the man obviously adored children. So did Kore, but children of her own was a very serious decision that Kore and Ben had never actually approached yet. Leo knew Kore better than anyone and suspected a bit of selfishness there, not that he'd ever dream of voicing such a suspicion on such a personal, marital, issue. Ursus had gone from 'intact', as documented during that dreadful arrest, to pregnant, in six months! Marx had tried his very, very best to make something of that by dragging up the original apprehension of Leo. Ursus had simply got Faust and Ben to track down the original Cadets involved in the 'search' of the premises and they quite happily told of how they'd been given bags of clothing to deposit between the two homes. Faust told Marx to piss off permanently after that and he was now employed by 'Bonetti's Legal Advisory Services' which dealt mainly with people trying to circumvent new and revised laws by stubbornly refusing to leave the old ones behind. Pape and Toller had left together for Haggardan and had made quite a successful name and respectable career for themselves in ensuring the well-being of ex-arena animals, something which was universally illegal now.

“No fat crackers?!” Kore's voice could be heard in the street outside. “What in black buggery are no fat crackers? I want a double fat honey cake with an apple syrup pancake on the top of it! You have the crackers, you blubber bucket.”

“Kore.” Ben walked in with The twins and their parents.

“Ben! Hey kids! Oi! More honey cakes and if I can't see fat dripping off them, I'll carve your ears off. Come here you two!” The twins whooped and dived on Kore, sending all three of the tumbling

across the bakery floor. “That walrus said I had to have crappy crackers because I was a gladiator!”

“Bleh!” Gaia pulled a face. “Uncle Ben said you had a body like a goddess.”

“Gaia!” Leo spluttered. “I’m sure Ben wasn’t talking to you at the time!”

“No, sorry. He was talking to Shawn.” Gaia apologised.

“Er ... in a ... an artistic sense.” Ben said quickly. “Guill! Come and help me carry these pancakes.” Guill scrambled up off the floor and followed Ben.

“He’s good with kids.” Leo said casually. “Natural in some people.”

“Well you’ve gone with all the bloody names haven’t you?” Kore said sarcastically. “Now hush.” She smiled at Leo’s astonished face.

“Does he know?” Leo whispered and Kore shook her head.

“Just found out. Shh. I’ll tell him after the arena exhibition.”

“You can’t do the exhibition! Kore ...”

“Oh for shit’s sake, will you never change? I’m not doing the bugger! Shawn is! I’m not totally dense. Oh and don’t tell Jyp otherwise they’ll know in Killian within the hour. Ben! Hand that big cake over here.”

“Yes hand her that big one.” Leo agreed and Kore rolled her eyes. “Now about this arena exhibition ...”

----- End

