



The Risen: A Novel of Spartacus

By David Anthony Durham

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From the author of the widely praised *Pride of Carthage*, the superb fictional rendering of Hannibal's epic military campaigns against Carthage's archenemy Rome, comes the perfect follow-up: an equally superb novel of the legendary gladiator Spartacus and the vast slave revolt he led that came ever so close to bringing Rome, with its supposedly invincible legions, to its knees.

In this thrilling and panoramic historical novel we see one of the most storied uprisings of classical times from multiple points of view: Spartacus, the visionary captive and gladiator whose toughness and charisma turn a prison break into a multi-cultural revolt that threatens an empire; his consort, the oracular Astera, whose connection to the spirit world and its omens guides the uprising's progress; Nonus, a Roman soldier working both sides of the conflict in a half-adroit, half-desperate attempt to save his life; Laelia and Hustus, two shepherd children drawn into the ranks of the slave rebellion; Kaleb, the slave secretary to Crassus, the Roman senator and commander saddled with the unenviable task of quashing an insurrection of mere slaves; and other players in a vast spectacle of bloodshed, heroism, and treachery.

In the pages of *The Risen*—the term the slaves in revolt have adopted for themselves—an entire, teeming world comes into view with great clarity and titanic drama, with nothing less than the future of the ancient world at stake. No one brings more verve, intelligence, and freshness to the novel of the classical age than David Anthony Durham.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

"[W]ell-done. . . [A] competent piece of historical fiction." ---Kirkus

About the Author

David Anthony Durham is the author of *Pride of Carthage*, the *Acacia Trilogy*, and other works of historical fiction and fantasy. His novels have been *New York Times* Notable Books, have won the 2001 First Novel Award and the 2002 Alex Award from the American Library Association, and have been translated into eight languages.

Steven Crossley has recorded over two hundred audiobooks and has won multiple AudioFile Earphones Awards. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, his audiobook performances cover an eclectic range of subjects in both fiction and nonfiction.

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ONE—The Gods Will Love Us

Drenis

Drenis hates his hands. They tremble, though he wills them not to. He should be eating, like the others, disguising his thoughts and intentions. Looking normal. They are just sitting and talking, he and Gaidres and Spartacus, his kinsmen. Around them the other gladiators move and eat and talk. They joke and insult each other. It's the dinner hour, just like any other day in the ludus of Cornelius Lentulus Vatia. But this one is not like any other day. This is the day they take oaths from other men, when they swear that they will do what they've so long whispered about doing, the day that dreams will be written in blood, with gods called upon as witnesses.

They sit at one of the long tables, in the warmth of the spring sun. Drenis leans forward, wooden bowl untouched before him. Needing to do something, he pretends to rub an ache out of his palm. He uses the motion to pinch his flesh, hoping the pain will steady him.

"Be at ease, Drenis," Spartacus says. His hands are relaxed. One of his fingers circles atop the jagged point of a thin sliver of metal that protrudes from the tabletop. A fishhook that was set there long ago. The wood around it is stained dark brown. "This is the easy part. Just a few oaths to take. We'll make many into one, and be stronger for it. Believe me."

The Galatian, Kastor, is the first to approach. He slams his cup on to the table, spilling the milky-white bone ash drink on the wood. He takes the seat across from them, with two of his companions hulking behind him. Kastor asks, loudly, if it is true that Ziles whimpered in his last moments? Did he truly call for his mother?

This, too, Drenis knew would be coming. Ziles, Gaidres' son, died the day before. A wound from the arean had festered until it took him to the afterlife. It is natural for the others to offer condolences. Or jeers. Either way, the watching eyes of the guards will see and yet not see. It had been Spartacus' idea. Take the oaths in public, he had said, where the entire transaction will be seen, but not seen for what it is.

There is a guard posted in the tower overlooking the eating area. He leans forward and studies them, though he is only mildly interested. The day is warm, and such banter between the men is standard fare. The guard looks away, as Spartacus said he would.

Gaidres, strong in the way of older men, betrays no emotion on his weatherworn face. When Kastor has spent his queries, he says, "My son died well, and you know it."

"We all know it," Spartacus says. "Kastor, do you swear yourself to our cause?"

Kastor smiles. He has bulky, over-sized features, a scar on his left cheek. His black beard is thick, and his skin is a red-hued tan at odds with blue eyes. He has an easy smile. He often boasts that he has a prick twice the length of other men. That, he claims, puts a man in good humor. "I swear."

"By what god?"

"Whichever one listens to slaves." He turns to his companions. "Who is the god of slaves? You know?"

Gaidres taps the table with his fingers.

Still smiling, Kastor sets his hand on the wood. He finds the fishhook and presses his thumb down on the metal sliver. When he pulls it away he displays his thumb, showing a knob of blood. "With this blood, I swear by Tengri. Tengri rewards and punishes. Tengri loves justice. Tengri will drive my hand. You have my oath, and my people with me." With a more somber tone, he says, "Ziles died with dignity. We all know it. He was a son as any man would wish to call his. Do not mark the words I say against him." He rises and moves away.

They sit for a moment, quiet until Spartacus says, "The Galatians are with us. One doesn't swear lightly by Tengri."

"There aren't many of them," Gaidres points out.

"No, but Kastor is worth several men."

More come to them. The Libyan, Nasah, presses his palm down on the barb, swearing to Ba'al. Kut, of the Nasamones, invokes the spirits of his ancestors. He leans down and pinches a bit of dirt from the floor and licks it. Thresu moves his palm atop the sliver of metal, carving the symbol of the Etruscan war god, Laran. Crixus of the Allobroges grasps Spartacus by the wrist. He squeezes harder than he needs to and pledges his men with an edge to his voice as if he's doing so unwillingly. Still, he says the words. The Germani leader, Oenomaus, gives his blood, but afterwards asks why the Maedians are the ones receiving the oaths? Why not he himself, since there are more Germani in the ludus than Thracians? Why not him, as he is first among the gladiators. "I have the most kills to my name. The most scars from the arena."

Each point, Drenis thinks, has a truth to it. Those of his tribe swear that Oenomaus has hidden his life force in one portion of his body and cannot be killed because of it. His wounds attest to it. The raw pucker of a spear thrust in his belly flesh. The welt that runs down his thigh. The wedge of hairless skin on the back of his head. An axe wound, it's said.

"Why are you not giving oaths to me?" Oenomaus asks.

"Because the plan is ours," Gaidres answers. "The god-talker is ours, and it was her vision."

Oenomaus pulls on one edge of his blonde mustache. He pulls so hard his lip stretches, and then snaps back into place when he releases it. "She had better be right."

"She is," Gaidres says. "You have seen her prophecies come true more than once."

"You have not even told us your plan. Will your woman kill them all by herself?"

With a motion of his hands, Spartacus stops Gaidres from responding. He says, "We have told you what you need to know. Hold to silence as long as you can. When it's broken, rise."

"Rise from within a locked cell?"

"We will take care of that. Kill those that have chained you. That is all that matters. You need do no more than that."

Oenomaus studies the Thracian's face a long time. "I have agreed to be with you in rising. After that, the Germani answer to no one. Remember that."

After he leaves, Gaidres says, "He will be hard to keep with us."

"I'll keep him," Spartacus whispers. "One way or another."

Still others come, even men who speak for no one but themselves. They each bind themselves to action in the name of their chosen gods. Such oath taking was unimaginable when Spartacus first proposed it. So many different men, different clans and races, with discordant tongues. Drenis was sure they could never be united in a single cause, even if it was their own freedom. But now it's happening. Nearly all of the gladiators are with them. Only the Latins have been left out, for they can least be trusted, and the Iberians, for none can make sense of their speech. No matter. They have enough. Those that are pledged outnumber the guards. It has taken Spartacus and Gaidres weeks to create such a union. With Astera's prophecies to support them, he won them over one by one.

And here it is, all in place for the morrow.

Chromis, the lone Mysian in the ludus, looks more nervous than the others when he sits down before Gaidres. Though a slave, he handles the keys that lock the various groups of men into their quarters, into cells or corridors or rooms, as varies with men's status and clan numbers. He is an ill-formed man, slight in the shoulders, with arms that seem to lack the full measure of muscles. One of his ears looks to have been chewed off long ago. He is no warrior. No gladiator either. For this, and his part in enslaving them, he is despised. Still, they need him.

"All is ready?" Spartacus asks.

Chromis nods. He scratches under his armpit, and then on his belly. Flea bites, likely. They all have them. Drenis makes a point of never acknowledging them.

"Valens has asked for Astera?" Gaidres asks. Valens is the cook.

"Yes." Chromis looks baffled by his own answer. "Just as she said he would. How does she know what's in men's minds?"

"He will have the key? You're sure?"

"If the women please him, he fetches sweet parcels for them. It makes them eager. Some of them. I don't imagine Astera will be eager."

"To please him?" Spartacus asks. "No. She will be eager to have his key, though." He motions for the Mysian to make a blood offering.

After Chromis leaves, Drenis mutters, "I don't trust him."

"Nor I," Gaidres says, "but he wants to be free from him as much as any of us. More, as he's a coward and he has it in his head that Vatia will soon put him in the arena to be slaughtered."

"Where would he get such an idea?" Spartacus says, wryly.

Gaidres doesn't answer. He rolls his shoulders, stands and takes his leave, saying he needs to burn seeds and speak the words for his son. It will take some time. He walks away, looking stiff in the legs.

Spartacus says, "You are right, of course. We will be betrayed. Some men, given the chance, will always disappoint. Astera dreamt of a herd of horses, all of them running. One of them began to bite the others, and each one that was bitten turned in fury and bit another. So the whole herd attacked itself. We do not know who it will be, but one of us will bite the others."

"Chromis?"

Spartacus shakes his head. "No, not him. Astera said it would not be him."

Drenis trusts the Mysian least. Dislikes him the most, but he knows that Astera has never yet been wrong, not since she arrived a couple of months ago and made it known that she was a priestess of Kotys. She is just a woman, a slight being with small, delicate features. Pretty, yes, but not a woman he can think of with lust. She is of the Dii people. Thracians, but a mountain clan, rough even by Thracian standards, with gods unique to them. Her eyes, whenever they touch on Drenis, scorch his skin. He feels the pain of it even when he doesn't know she's looking. The side of his face flares with heat and he turns and... she is there, her green eyes fixed on him. Just a woman, but with power in her that he can't fathom.

"If Astera says it is not him," Drenis admits, "it is not him. But who then? Spartacus, anyone could betray us! He would have only to get a guard's ear, to point fingers and name names. Some of them must be itching to do so already."

"You are right, of course." Spartacus nods. "Tonight every man that swore to us will lie in his cot twisting, chewing over what will happen tomorrow night. One of them, if not more, will decide his fate is more assured by winning Vatia's favor. Perhaps some are already thinking this, but tonight is when their minds will reel, thinking what boon they can win by turning against us. It was always the greatest flaw of our plan. We have to trust many to succeed; but many cannot be trusted. A great problem."

"We should never have taken the oaths," Drenis says. "Why did we? They're not doing anything in

preparation anyway."

"True. But this way, once we are free, the men will be bound to us. They will think themselves part of the plot and own it. We will fly from here together instead of in a hundred different directions. We'll be stronger for it. Listen, I will tell you something." Spartacus leans forward. "Cousin, you worry too much. For every problem there is a solution. We have the men's oath. They will be true to them, whether they intend to or not. It's simple. We will not rise tomorrow, Drenis."

"We will not?"

"No," Spartacus says, humor conveyed in the shape of his eyes. "We don't rise tomorrow. We rise tonight instead."

Later, locked in the cell he shares with Spartacus, Drenis thinks, It's simple. Tonight, not tomorrow. Of course. Nobody will have time to betray them. They'll have time to consider it, but not to do it.

Then he thinks, tonight is this night. The sun is gone and the world has been black for some hours already. His pulse pounds, but they have to wait. That's the worst part. If anything at all is to happen, it's Astera who will begin it. A whole ludus full of men, warriors, gladiators; all of them waiting for a woman to act as they cannot. The choreography of the plan has always seemed dauntingly complex. Chromis is to take Astera to Valens, a free man who takes his pleasure in a locked cell, with women chained to protect his safety. It is an arrangement that has benefitted both men for some time.

This night, though, Astera's wrist chains will be unlocked. Alone with the cook, she will kill him. How she is to accomplish that Drenis can't imagine. She's so slight, small boned. Valens is thick, well-fed and strong in his own way. But, the plan is for Astera to dispatch him. With his key, she and Chromis will enter the kitchens, and from there Chromis can unlock a cabinet that will get him still further keys, ones that will crack the ludus open from inside. There is a guard to kill before they can reach those keys, and will be only Astera and Chromis who deal with him. Again, Drenis can't envision it. A woman, and a man made useless with his deformed arms? Only after these things are accomplished can the cages that trap the gladiators begin to be opened.

Drenis squirms in his cot. Why isn't he calmer? He wants to be. He always tries to move with Spartacus' confidence, thinking that if he is the same outwardly he will be the same in his mind as well. He isn't. He tried on Kastor's arrogance, but it didn't fit. He wanted to be stoic, uncomplaining, like Gaidres. Or quick-tempered, bristling with anger, like Crixus.

And then he thinks of Bendidora. It's so easy to be reminded of her. A thought need not have anything to do with her, and yet it can take him right to her. He sees her as he did that first night in Muccula's hall, when he was fifteen and she not even that. He sees her serving the men, face hidden behind drapes of blonde hair. How had he known she was beautiful before he even saw her face? He can't say. But he knew. He tried not to stare, thinking everyone would see him, worried he would offend their host and that Muccula would learn that he was thinking of pressing against his daughter from behind. He had felt trapped by the pressure in his groin, and he had feared the others would know about that too. They would make him stand. They would laugh at him.

They hadn't. And later, the next year, when his father had proposed marriage between him and Bendidora, she had not laughed at him either. Her father made the bride price high, but his father promised to pay it. Remembering that, and the joy it gave him, made his eyes tear. Stupid of him, to long for things lost. For

something so nearly his; and now so undeniably out of his reach.

"Are you asleep?" Spartacus asks. He doesn't wait for an answer. "Don't think about her. Or do, if it gives you courage. Does it give you courage, brother?"

They are not really brothers, but Drenis welcomes it when he uses the word. "Yes, when I see her again—"

"What will you do? Plow her field? She may be married to another, you know. She said yes to you first, but it never came to be." Spartacus rolls in the cot above Drenis. His head comes into view, shadowed. "I'm just speaking the truth. Who knows what's happened since we left country? She may be a slave. She may be here in Italy for all we know. She may be gone to the next world." He pauses a moment, and then adds, "Still, she had eyes for you before you had them for her. That's truth as well."

"She did not," Drenis says.

"Of course she did. Why wouldn't she? You're Drenis, loved by all women."

Drenis knows he has a pleasing face and that his body, though he is past twenty years, has stayed that of a youth just becoming a man. Before he was a slave, back in Thrace, women had teased him, calling him a twin to Paris, saying Bendidora was his Helen. He wanted his Helen, but having Paris' face embarrassed him. It was a face to please women, yes, but he would have chosen a face to please men. A face that could make them trust and believe and follow. Could he chose his face, he would have one like Spartacus.

"When I see her," he answers, "she will tell me which men have plowed her while I was gone. I'll find them and bash their heads."

Spartacus snorts. "Well, that's one way. If it were me, I would plow her first. After—if I still had the energy—I would bash heads." He settles back against his bedding, raining flecks of straw. Drenis closes his eyes until the debris stops falling. "Tell me something you remember, Drenis."

They do this often, the two of them alone in the tiny cell they share, talking of home. Spartacus says if they keep Thrace alive in their minds their gods will know of it. Zalmoxis will know they still live. Darzalas will drive their hand because they stayed loyal. He says of all the gods the Great Mother has the furthest reach. She is on the earth wherever the animals and plants of nature are. If she knows they are true to her, she will aid them once they are free and in the hills. The Romans will not be able to find them. They don't know her, and she cares not for them and their stinking cities.

"Speak up," Spartacus says. "It's better to talk than to wait in silence."

He's right. But what to say? Drenis remembers that when he was a boy his mother took him to the hut the women went to sometimes to attend to private things. She walked him there while his father was away on campaign. She built a fire and in the low, smoky light, she told him everything she knew about the Great Mother. As she talked she heated a needle. She had him lay on his belly and, telling him not to wince, she pricked at the small of his back. For a long time she worked there.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" she asked. "This stigma will be of Zalmoxis. Men will see it and like it, which will be good for you. Here is a secret, just for you." She traced a circle on his skin. "Here, this is the Great Mother. She encircles Zalmoxis. She contains him. Men won't know this. They'll see it and think it means that Zalmoxis owns the world. Really, though, the world owns him. It will be a fine stigma. It will

grow as you do."

Drenis believes it has, though he's never seen it. He can't tell Spartacus that, though. Instead, he says, "Do you remember the pit of snakes?"

"Snakes?"

"Once we found them, when we ran the hills as boys."

"Who was with us?"

"Skaris. Prytos. Nico as well." There is another, but he hesitates to name him. Then remembers he has a place in the story. "Ziles. Once we came upon a hollow that thronged with snakes. Hundreds upon hundreds of them. I couldn't number them there were so many, all of them writhing together. We stared at them from the crag above. And then Ziles went to throw down a stone on them."

"Yes," Spartacus says, "I remember that. I caught his arm and told him not to."

"I was glad you did that."

"Ziles wasn't."

"I tried to find that place again, but I couldn't."

"Why did you want to find it?"

Drenis knows why, but it's not something he can say. After seeing them that one time, he often dreamt of it again. Only, in his dreams he was there alone. Each time, he climbed down the rocks and waded into the snakes. He sunk down amongst them. They writhed around him like a thousand lovers, touching him with their noses. He had the dream so often that he thought he should find the place alone and see what would happen. Perhaps, he had thought, he was meant to do in life what he did in his dreams. Perhaps, if he did, he would be blessed.

He doesn't want to say all of that. "No reason, really. I just wanted to see them again."

"Not throw rocks at them?"

"No, I wouldn't-"

And then Astera is at the bars of their cell door. So suddenly that it clips Drenis' words mid-thought. She stands there, skin white in the faint light coming from the corridor. For a moment, he thinks it's not Astera at all but the ghost of her. Then he hears her breathing. He hears the keys she holds, searching for the lock. Spartacus is off the cot fast, leaving Drenis blinking as straw falls on him.

By the time Drenis has wiped the debris from his face and stood, the door is open. Astera steps in. She smiles. Even in the dim light he can see her teeth. Amazed that he would ever feel such a thing, he thinks perhaps he should try to move in the world like Astera. A man who moved like her would be feared.

She reaches out and presses her hand to Spartacus' face, smearing it with something dark. "Valens gave me

something to give you. He said all great things begin with an offering." Glancing at Drenis, she adds, "It's for you as well. You should be less pretty." As if to make him that, she draws her other hand across his face, leaving moist slashes.

It takes a moment, but then he understands. He tastes it. Blood. The first of that night's offering.

Sura

Sura has never doubted Astera, not after what she saw her do in the arena. Not since she explained it afterwards. When she said that this night would be their last as slaves Sura knew it would be so. She waits, Cerzula and Epta with her, the three Thracian women close together in the tiny, pitch black cell they share with Astera. They know that Astera has gone to pleasure fat Valens. She's not the first to have done that that. But tonight she promised not pleasure him. This night, he will serve her instead.

Sura and her sisters know things that the others do not. Other women sleep in the cells near them, down the corridor and on the floor below. They slumber, some snoring. One woman mumbles complaints, for she can't sleep and wants to deny the same to others as well. They think this is a night like any other. They'll awake as slaves and stay as slaves and die as slaves. Sura knows better, and thinks them fools. How can anybody sleep tonight? How can they not know what's about to happen?

"We should pray to Kotys," Epta says. Her voice is brittle with fear. "Here. Do as I have. Offer blood to her." Sura cannot see the younger woman in the darkness, but she knows that she is holding out the feather that fell to her from the sky. She rubbed the tip of the quill to a sharp point, which she uses to nick her flesh. More than any of them, Epta has grown fervent for Kotys, Astera's goddess. Of the four of them, she has always been the most afraid. Pretty and small, vulnerable in a way that makes men feel big beside her. None of them have it easy, but for Epta slavery has been harder than most. That is why she loves Astera so fervently, for her strength and for the things she promises.

Sura doesn't love Astera. She fears her, which is a truer emotion, she thinks.

"Give me the feather," Cerzula says. A moment later, she sighs and asks the goddess to see her. She swears her loyalty and promises to always make offerings to her and love her above all other gods. Epta affirms every word, breathless as if in the throes of passion.

Kotys is a Thracian god, but one nearly forgotten on the plains, where Sura is from. Kotys, Astera has said, is easily angered and hard to appease. She is the rage that burns in a person that sees her family killed, women and children raped. She is the one who never forgets. She whispers always of revenge. She slays those that anger her and showers her face with their blood. Kotys is the wolf that eats the moon when it grows fat. And she is the moon as well, for gods can be more than one thing. They can have more than story. Sura, being Odomanti, had not known this before. Because of Astera, she knows it now.

Sura had thought little of her the first time she saw her. Slight and disheveled, her flame-colored hair was such a tangle that it hid her face. Her stigmas spoke for her, though. Dii markings. Serpents entwined with trees on her arms. Wolves copulating with the Great Mother across her right breast. Profane. Dii beliefs, not Odomanti.

They were chained together in the slave market. They stood, naked and shivering in the damp morning chill, as other women, newly purchased, joined them. Sura knew—because one of her captors had told her—that they had no value. They weren't slaves to work. They weren't slaves with a span of months or years ahead of them. They were the women of a people being punished for spurning Rome. Driven on foot from Thrace, abused over every mile, to see Roman might for themselves. Men went to the arena to die fighting in it. Their women, she was told, were to go to the arena as well, but not to fight. Just to die.

The morning of the day this was to happen, slavers roused them from the holding pen they had been housed in for several days. She didn't know it then, but she was in the ludus of Cornelius Lentulus Vatia. He had purchased them as a gift for the crowd. Encumbered by chains and stiff from so long sitting immobile, Sura stumbled on the uneven paving stones of the city's streets. She had never seen a city so large, so choked with humans living piled on top of each other. It was a hell of fetid odors and rotting piles of things. There was nothing like this place in all of Thrace.

They were taken to a great arena, a structure several stories high. Gardens of flowering plants surrounded it, pools of water with walkways between them. This was the moment she felt the filthiest, beside clear water and living plants, the fragrance of flowers floating on the air and the low hum of the insects that worked among them. It was the first place of beauty she had seen in the city, but it was a lie. They descended into a gaping mouth that led down into a network of tunnels under the arena, corridors full of wretched, chained, barely human things. The guards stuffed them in with others and left them.

It was a long wait, long enough for her to think of many ways she might be killed. As if to help her visions of torture, a voice began speaking in Greek, a language she knew. She couldn't tell where among the bodies he was, but could hear him clearly enough. He said that once he saw a funeral games in Rome. That one began with stunted men pretending to fight over a stunted woman. The men chased each other around the arena, dodging things thrown by the crowd, looking ridiculous with their wooden swords. In the end the men joined forces and attacked the woman, forcing her to do sexual acts.

"The crowd liked that," the voice said.

Sura tried not to listen to him, but her mind took in pieces of what he said. Images of the condemned tied to posts, whipped until they were raw, almost insensible. Slaves hunted by leopards and lions. Others doused in oil and set afire. Men made to fight without armor, each slash or thrust cutting deep.

And then a guard was yelling at them. Sura didn't understand his Latin, but it didn't matter. He yanked their chains and dragged them into motion. Other men joined him, men that had leave to kick and punch the women. They were shoved through the corridors, up a sloping ramp and through a series of gates. Animal scents assaulted her, making the hairs on her arms and back prickle. A beast, somewhere nearby, roared over and over again. She wondered if that would be the thing that killed her.

They spilled out on the hot sand. Blinded by the sudden brightness, for a time she could see nothing. She could hear, though. Voices. Shouts. Applause. Eyes adjusting, the sight of so many people dizzied her. The bowl of the arena was an enormous mouth, and each of those heads was one of the creature's teeth. They were inside a monster. This was its maw. This was where it feeds and where she was meant to die.

Surely she would have, if not for Astera.

Sura is on her knees with her sisters, blood on her palms, when she hears a voice.

"The goddess heard you," it says. "Heard and answered."

Epta starts. The voice is disembodied. In the blackness, it seems to come from the air itself, but Sura knows it's just Astera, arriving as she said she would.

"Touch my hand," Astera says.

All three women clutch at Astera's hand—which she has thrust through the bars—until Spartacus appears, holding a small lamp. This is the man whom Astera saw in a dream before she saw him in waking life. Sura thinks, not for the first time, that if Astera had wanted to choose her companion—instead of letting a dream do so for her—she could not have chosen better than Spartacus. Her breathing comes faster when he is near. She hides this, though. He is Astera's man. Not hers.

"Sisters," Astera says, holding the key out to Cerzula and indicating that she means Epta as well, "open the cages and free the women. Everyone. Tell them to be quiet. There will be a time for noise but it is not yet. Move them toward the gate to the training grounds and wait. Gaidres will lead them from here."

"But where are you going?" Epta asks.

"We have something to do," is all she says. To Sura, she says, "Come."

They move in silence. Up out of the women's quarters and then, keeping to the shadows, around toward the storage buildings. They crawl atop a pile of crates and emerge through an opening onto a rooftop. Some of the roofs drop off below their level. Some rise a story or two higher. Beyond the walls the maze of Capua smolders. It encircles them, a festering scab on the world. A haze of smoke hangs above the jumble of buildings and clouds the night air. Sura longs to be far from here, in hills and trees, away from the scents of fire and iron and the filth of so many people jammed together. She wonders how they will ever get through the city and out. It doesn't seem possible.

They climb to the spine of the rooftop, over it and down. At the edge they jump to a shelf. Spartacus boosts them up and then manages to climb up behind them. They walk the spine of a higher roof. At the far end of it Spartacus jumps down and waits for them. Astera first. Then Sura dangles from the edge. She lets go when she feels Spartacus' hands touch her legs. He half-catches her, his body pressing against hers for a moment. Then he's moving again. The creaking of the roof tiles beneath their feet, the scuffing of their feet on the mortar: every noise is a scream in Sura's ears. Why are they doing this? Wherever they are going, this way will not take them out of the ludus. She wants to say this, but surely they know. Surely there's a reason.

When she realizes where they are, her steps slow. She has been here before. Raised up above the stink of the cells and the training grounds... Air perfumed by incense.... They are approaching Vatia's quarters. Spartacus turns, finger to his lips. In the quiet—grown somehow more intense with that finger to those lips—she hears men talking. Spartacus glides to the other side of the corridor. He steps close, so that he can see into the guards' alcove, but he stays in shadow.

Sura joins Astera where she squats beside a low partition. Slowly, they both raise their heads. On the other side, two men sit on stools on either side of a round table, a game of dice between them. The older of them shells nuts with the nob at the base of a dagger. He sticks it, point first, into the table as he takes up the dice. Sura realizes Spartacus has no weapons. But these men do. The dagger. Short swords at their waists. She hopes this will decide the matter. They'll turn back now. They'll join the others and flee. But Spartacus keeps watching. His jaw hangs open. She thinks he is sliding his tongue across his teeth.

The moment the older man rises, Spartacus moves. He strides in like a person on urgent business. The standing man looks at him. He grabs his sword and starts to draw it. Spartacus snatches up the dagger. He slams it into the man's neck, and then rips it to one side. The man spins with the momentum of the side cut, his artery severed and life draining out of him. He turns and takes a few steps before crumbling.

Spartacus closes on the sitting man. A youth, really. He has not risen or drawn his sword. He just sits, his lips in an oval, one arm ready to tip dice from his cup. Spartacus seems to know that he doesn't need haste. He chooses precision instead. He puts a hand on the young guard's shoulder and thrusts the knife into his chest. Just so, into his heart. Recognition of his own death is on the youth's face. He almost looks like he's been waiting for it.

Spartacus says, "They made that easy." The way he says it sounds like a complaint.

"Kotys held them still," Astera says. She takes the dagger from him and motions that the swords are his. He wrenches the belt and scabbard from the fallen man and straps it on.

Turning to her, Astera says, "Sister, you have been to Vatia's bed. Take us to it."

To Vatia? Sura thinks. The idea is preposterous. He is the beating heart of the evil of this place. Why go to him when they are trying to be free of him? And, more than that, he is her greatest shame. Yes, she went to his bed when he demanded it. Others did, but as far as she knew, she was the only one he used in a particular way, entering her from behind, not the normal way that makes children, but in the other place. He was rough at it, asking her if it hurt. He was so curious about whether or not it hurt. She's tried hard to forget. Sometimes she did, until she saw him again. Until he summoned her again. Then he made her remember. She'd hoped that was over, but, no. Vatia, through Astera, is summoning her again.

"You and Epta are the only two of us that he's taken to his bed," Astera says. "If I had your knowledge I would not ask, but I don't. I can't ask Epta. You know that. But you're stronger. We have purpose, sister. Take us. You will not mind seeing him this last time."

She doesn't want to, but those words—*you're stronger*—warm her. It pleases her that Astera thinks so. She tries to look as if she is strong, as if she shakes off the things done to her with disdain. As far as she can tell Cerzula does this, and Astera seems to forget the men that use her the moment they're done. For Sura it's a struggle. For her, only seeing Epta—the most often forced and the most devastated by it—gives her some comfort. The one time Sura feels full control over her memories is when she's chastising Epta to control hers. In those moments, when she's watching the small girl tremble: that's when she believes and feels her own words—but only in comparison to Epta, who can't do the same.

Astera steps closer. Green-eyed, she speaks close enough that Sura feels her breath on her skin. "Remember the arena. I didn't fail you there. I won't here either."

The arena where she was sent to die, but didn't.

The mouth of the beast, with all those faces staring down at her.

That afternoon, it had been hard to pull her eyes away from them, but she did. They were not going to kill her, just watch it be done. She saw the man that was to be their executioner. Not a lion or leopard, then. Just a man, pacing on the sand, watching them. He was a large man. He wore a massive helmet that flared out to

either side and rose in a high crest. It encased his head completely. He had no face, this man, just a metal head from which he looked out from holes he breathed through. His chest was bare, fleshy and clumped with hair. Thick legs supported him, and his loincloth swayed heavy with the thing inside it. He carried a long-handled mallet with a block of iron at the end. It was a crushing weapon. A skull breaker. A bone destroyer.

Someone grabbed Sura's wrists. A short man, stout, ugly, he unlocked her wrist cuffs. They fell away and smacked down on the sand, dead there. Just like that, they became powerless. The man turned to her neck collar. He yanked and jerked on it for a time, and then it snapped open. It too fell to the sand. He moved on to the next woman.

Sura was vaguely aware that they were unchaining all of them, but mostly she stared at the chafed, raw skin of her wrists. The sun touched them, and the air. She was unchained. The cruelty of it took her breath away. Unchained, but inside the monster's mouth, about to be swallowed.

A boy ran up to them, carrying a sword. He was thin, with an upper lip that pulled upwards, connected to his nose. He tossed the sword down, and then he ran. A black haired woman dashed forward and snatched up the weapon. Because of it, she was the one armed when the lumbering man arrived. He dropped the mallet to stand upright in the sand, and drew his sword. The woman crouched. The others were all trying to escape in different directions. They didn't get far. The arena slaves grabbed them about the waists and hurled them back.

The black haired woman attacked first. He blocked her sword with his. Once. Twice. After a third his sword slashed her arm. It was an ugly cut, but not fatal. That came next. His elbow snapped back and he jabbed the iron deep into her side. He moved his blade within her, controlling the way her body fell, slicing organs as he did so. By the time she hit the sand she was dead.

The executioner turned from her, sheathed his sword and took up the mallet. He hefted it with his arms and torso and legs, showing just how heavy that block of iron was. That was why he didn't worry about setting down the mallet. No woman could lift that weapon. He raised it high, his flesh quivering over his tensed muscles, and dropped it on to the dead woman's head.

The executioner left the weapon where it fell. He picked another target, and trudged toward her, drawing his sword again.

The Dii woman snatched up the dead woman's sword. It was an ugly weapon, dented and worn with age. She pressed her thumb to it. "Careful," one of the handlers said. "I sharpened that myself." From the humor in his words Sura knew the weapon was blunted. Useless.

The executioner closed on another woman. She was frantic, doing everything she could to avoid him. As terrified as she was of the gladiator, she had no fear of the herders. She tried to dart between them. She clawed to get past them. It didn't help. The executioner got near enough to leap at her. He roared forward and slashed at her. He took her upraised arm off near the elbow. He got a grip of her other arm and lifted her, stabbing her belly again and again. He left her where she fell and lumbered to retrieve his mallet.

The Dii woman did something then that surprised Sura. She shouted and ran toward the executioner. She threw the useless sword. It twirled end over end toward him. He swatted it away with his sword. As he moved his blade from one side of his body to the other, she passed him and reached the mallet. Skidding to a stop, she reached for the shaft. She gripped it but made no move to lift it.

The executioner pounded back toward her. He spoke as he walked and Sura knew he was saying awful things. He was looking forward to smashing her skull. He'd do even more than that. Bone by bone, he would make pulp of her corpse. She knew this as clearly as if he were speaking to her in a language Sura could understand.

The Dii woman watched him through the matted screen of her hair, which was so very red in the harsh light. What the Dii woman did then shouldn't have been possible. Not for her, a woman, one who had been weakened by ill treatment and thin from the long road walked from Thrace. When the man was near, she lifted the mallet. She swung for his head. It smashed the man's helmet with such force the first blow likely killed him. He spun with the impact. He shifted his thick legs and managed to stay upright long enough for the woman to lash the mallet again. Backhanded, with an upward angle. The iron struck so hard it looked, for a moment, like the man's helmeted head was going to fly off. Not quite, though it hung at a sickening angle, spine-broke. He went down.

The woman dropped the mallet. It fell with all its weight to the sand and stuck there.

That was why Sura didn't perish in the arena that day. Instead, the remaining women were chained again and sent back to Vatia's ludus. Sura learned then that Dii woman's name was Astera. She said that she was powerful because her goddess, Kotys, gave her strength. She told them that and they believed her. That's why Sura cannot deny Astera. She does know the way to Vatia's bedroom. She hates that Spartacus will understand what was done to her there. It is not her fault, any more than his fate is. But it churns in her belly. She tries not to think about it. Tries just to move, fast and quiet.

When they spill out into a square courtyard with a pool of water at its center, she knows they are near. The roof is open to the sky. They step out into the moonlight again. Sura finds her reflection in the rippling surface of the water. She stares at it, but the air stirs the water too much. She can't see herself clearly. She's still looking when the other two bend to scoop handfuls of water to their mouths.

A woman emerges from a corridor at the edge of the courtyard. She wears a thin shift and walks with a hand held to a yawning mouth. Wife or mistress, Sura isn't sure. House slave, perhaps, coming from having labored in Vatia's bed. She walks in from the left, out to the right. She doesn't turn her head to see the shapes lit by the starry sky. When her bare footfalls fade, they move again. They enter the corridor the woman had exited. It leads to a suite of rooms, crowded with furniture and partitions. And then there is Vatia.

Sura stops.

The first time she ever saw him, he had stood before her draped in a black cloak. His face square, strong jawed but fleshy in the cheeks, jowly as it slipped down into his thick neck. The oil in his black hair had glistened. His eyebrows cut two dark gashes over eyes that seemed small for his face. He had stretched and rolled his shoulders, like he thought himself a gladiator warming up. He unfastened the clasp at his neck and shrugged the cloak from his shoulders. Beneath it he was naked. Wide chest. Wider belly. His legs were spindly by comparison. His penis hung limp, curving to one side. She would not have looked at it, but he held his hands out at his waist, framing his sex as the very thing he wanted to reveal to her.

So he had been when he first forced himself on her. He took pleasure, he told her, in having her in the same bed his wife slept in. Only, he did things to her that he could not to his wife. They were things for his pleasure, not hers.

Now that same body lays on an ornate wooden bed. It is narrow, held high by long, intricately carved legs. Naked yet again, with a thin sheet bunched down at his feet. He sleeps. His snores attest to how deeply. Sura knows his snores. She's heard them before, and remembers how he slept so quickly after having his pleasure, so deeply. She remembers being there, sometimes trapped beneath him, his body a dead weight on her and she powerless to move him. She feels exactly the same way now.

Astera creeps toward him. She places one foot on the padded stool beside the bed. She tests her weight on it, and then steps up. The mattress gives beneath her foot. Sura knows that if she were closer she'd be able to smell the scent of the perfumed wool that stuffed it.

There is a gasp. It's from the drowsy woman. She's returned, and she isn't drowsy anymore. She takes in the intruders. Sura can see her mouth opening, and knows it holds a scream inside it. Spartacus has her before she lets it out. He pushes her back against a pillar and clamps his hand over her mouth. He looks back. Vatia's snoring has stopped, but he sleeps on. He whispers, "Slash him. Cut him now, before he wakes."

Astera doesn't slash him. She holds the knife pointed toward his throat. With her other hand, she reaches out. Slow. Slow. And then fast. She grabs a fold of his neck skin in a tight fist, twisting it. The man's eyes open. He bucks on his mattress. He tries to grab her, but she writhes. He punches her, but she twists and turns. His blows only graze her. She clenches his neck all the harder, the small, hard muscles of her arm quivering.

"What are you waiting for?" Spartacus asks, not whispering anymore. "Kill him!"

She doesn't. Not yet.

And then Vatia goes still. His eyes widen with recognition. He manages to speak. "You? How dare-"

Astera stabs. Not just once. Again and again and again, her arm working with furious speed. Vatia manages a few shouts, but they garble, lose power. Then it's just Astera's arm thrusting, the wet impact of her balled fist punching into his torn flesh, the audible splash of blood on the tile floor. Blood sprays in a fan when the artery in his neck is severed. It drenches Astera. She opens her mouth like a child catching rain drops. Like a goddess of vengeance drinking tribute.

The woman Spartacus is holding screams. He must have loosened his grip. She screams to wake the dead. Spartacus moves to cup his hand over her mouth, but he hits her too solidly. Her head bangs against the pillar and she drops like a child's doll, limp on the floor. He spins away from her, scowling. "Stupid woman," he says. But it's not disdain in his voice. It's something else.

Astera climbs from Vatia's body like a sated lover. "He knew me," she says. "I took him for Kotys, and he knew it was I that did it."

Spartacus hooks an eyebrow. "Not the way I would've done it."

"That's why you didn't do it," Astera says. She drags the fingers of one of her bloody hands down his chest. "You would have wasted his death."

Astera yanks a sheet from a second bed. She piles them atop Vatia's corpse. Sura grabs pillows from the couches. Spartacus shoves other furniture against Vatia's bed. He pours oil from a lamp over it. He shatters a carafe of oil on the floor. When Astera touches flame to it, the oil and fabric and wood whoosh into an instant fury.

They leave the room thick with smoke, the fire spreading into the rafters of the roof. Spartacus hefts the unconscious woman up over his shoulder. For an exhilarating moment Sura thinks he is going to toss her into the fire. Instead he carries her back the way they came. They meet Gaidres in the courtyard. He steps out of the shadows, butcher's knife jammed under the twine at his waist. Drenis is there as well. Gaidres motions for Spartacus to whisper with him.

Spartacus leaves the unconscious woman half-submerged in the pool in the courtyard. At first Sura doesn't know why he bothered. She looks at the woman, the rippling water, the stone tiles around her and the open sky above. She studies the woman's form. She kneels and looks at her face. It's not a Thracian face. It's darker skinned. Her hair is dark. Her lips are full. Sura wonders if she is the wife whose place she took so that Vatia could do the vile things he lusted to. She's young, but is she pretty? Sura can't tell.

The men leave. And then Astera does as well, motioning for Sura to follow her. Sura stays beside the pool, puzzling over the Roman woman. Spartacus left her to live, though he didn't have to. She pinches her tongue between her teeth as she thinks of this. As before, she tries to see her own face reflected in the pool's water. The surface is stiller now than before, but her face is in shadow. She sees where it should be, but she is only a silhouette. That seems wrong. She is not a woman without a face. Why can't she see herself?

The unconscious woman stirs.

Sura takes her head in her hands. She checks that Astera has not returned, and then she presses the woman down into the water.

From the Hardcover edition.

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