

The Gargoyle and the Lion

A still came over the crowd when I stepped into the arena. It was something I'd done dozens of times, but never to silence. As soon as I began moving, silence turned to hushed whispers, as if I were a rare bird who would take flight at the slightest hint of noise.

My destination was the crimson red spot in the sand. It's center specifically, not the edges where they had dragged him away. Crouching down, slipped my hand beneath the burning hot surface. My fingers had to work down and down until a trickle of white broke through the red. Around me, the crowd went quiet again. A moment of silence for him. The doors of the gate began to wheel open, so I scooped a handful of sand into a leather drawstring pouch, tied it to my belt loop. My chest grew wide with a heavy, weary sigh.

Theron was standing to my left when the lioness stalked through. Guards, safe from her claws, had already agitated her with spears and stones and sticks before they cranked the gate wheels, and she came at us in an instant. Her gait across the sand was smooth and unhindered.

My hearing went dead, silencing the rising cheers from the crowd. Her paws fell against the sand like a drumbeat, the rhythm pounding against my eardrums but muffled, like I was underwater. I imagined her a giant, stumbling towards us, feet heavy on the Earth.

Already an adult when they found her, with three half-grown cubs in tow. Caught all four of them. Stuck her in a cage. Filed her teeth, gave her a minimal amount of food. Named her the Golden Dutchess. This was her sixth fight. Beside me, I heard Theron draw his axe across the front of his shield. We trained to communicate without speaking. Someone once called us Gargoyle. Singular. It stuck. In all our fights, we had never made a noise, even when wounded. Our eyes met. I nodded. He wanted the lioness to himself; I would be his backup.

We'd fought a lion before. A male, who was much scrawnier. We left two pikes stuck between his ribs, and the crowd roared

as my dagger drew across his throat. His life had not been peaceful, and his death should not have been out of mercy. Five days later, the sand was still stained from the blood. I try to forget the blood. I've never grown accustomed to it.

She rushed towards Theron; there was no doubting her target. The crowd roared as all four of her paws came off the ground, claws extended, ears back, muscles loose. Claws scraped against wood. Theron's shield arm turned too soon. The lioness clasped her claws into each of his shoulders. Her weight took him down, but he stayed tucked beneath his shield, her teeth and claws cracking against the steel helm he wore, it's angry frowning face protecting his handsome one. I ran towards them. Two. Three. Four. Five paces. I was halfway to them when I realized my feet didn't slip in the sand anymore.

The downswing of my war hammer crushed her hind quarter. A roar of pain lept from man and beast as she crumpled. She spun to face me, ears back, a low croaking growl warning me away. Local children kept toys shaped like a lion, with deep ridges running down it's back. A wooden dowel fit into the belly and by running the dowel down it's spine, the sound it made was nearly identical. They played them in the streets at night, keeping me awake.

In half a heart beat she rushed at me, her fangs bared, stirring sand into the air. It was merely a ruse: her muscles tensed before she even reached me. But her feint went challenged, and I brought the crowd to it's feet when my hammer came down against her shoulder, knocking her sideways. Guards threw nets over her, tangling her legs, freeing us from death. A clear reminder that neither of us were worth anything if we killed each other. I was lucky.

Theron drew in a sharp breath as I pulled his shield away. His thigh was cut from groin to knee, and blood pulsed out with each heartbeat, where it dried quickly in the sun. The smell of iron crowded my senses. With the weight of his shield gone, he reached up and unclasped his helm. Long claw marks were drawn down both sides, it's top dented from the lion's teeth. As soon as I wriggled it off his head, he grabbed hold of it and threw it as far as he could. It landed like a rock.

We clasped hands, staring into each other's eyes as he slipped away.

"Remember the first one," I asked, like it was any other day.

"The sand, it was stained red for days," his voice was heavy, but his cheeks dimpled as he smiled. Girls loved them. They'd approach us in pairs, smiling and telling jokes. His bright amber eyes laughed just as much as he did. I've never seen a gaze like it. It was soft and intense and almost red in the sun. The girls would giggle among themselves, touching their hair, then walk away slowly. But they always looked back. He'd flash his smile one last time and they'd round the corner whispering to each other.

Those dimples left his cheeks just before he clasped his other hand over our shared grip, his amber gaze fading.

"Do not forget me." he said, in a whisper. I never could. Our gaze stayed locked as his pupils opened wide. His muscles shivered, tensed, and he was gone. Our hands stayed clasped until they pulled me away.

I planted both feet over the crimson sand. In one hand, Theron's axe. The other, my shield. My breastplate. His battered helm. The Golden Dutchess walked out of the darkness. This time, I was alone.