

Eve of Passion

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When Eve suddenly finds herself obligated to accompany the champion gladiator, Rhonan, to a celebration, she does not feel the honor that the other women of the town would feel in her place. After awaking from a steamy hot dream of Rhonan, Eve is determined to decline. But when Rhonan receives word that she has backed out, he pays her a personal visit. Swept away by masculine touch and presence, Eve is suddenly too aware of how powerless she is to this gladiator and finds herself both frightened and excited at the prospect of being fully under his control for even just one night.



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Eve of Passion : Chapter 1

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A flurry of young boys rushed past Eve in a hurry to get a closer look at the noisome procession coming down the road. The loud clacking of horse hooves on the stone street echoed through the afternoon air and bounced off the walls of the surrounding shops, magnifying the sound. Eve was shoved again, this time by a couple girls a few years younger than herself. She shook her head and scoffed, "I really don't see why they're making such a fuss."

Her brother Marcus, twenty-four and barely a year older than Eve, walked beside her but his attention was on the procession as well. "Admit it, Eve, you're as fascinated as everyone else." Marcus was tall with a solid frame and a handsome face. He worked hard and was strong as an ox, but unlike the men here today, Marcus had never felt the need to prove his strength or fighting skills.

"I am not fascinated." Eve watched the procession and thronging crowd with distaste. "They are brutes and they're being honored for killing."

"They're being honored for their battle skills." Marcus corrected. "They're warriors."

"Warriors." Eve scoffed again. "Gladiators are not warriors. They fight and kill for sport and entertainment. It's pure brutality."

Marcus smiled darkly. "And you wouldn't like it if Rhonan's eye turned to you?"

Eve's attention shifted from her brother to the forefront of the procession and the champion gladiator, Rhonan. He reeked of arrogance, sitting proud atop a large white steed, barely acknowledging the sea of adoring woman and girls swarming at the edge of the crowd. His shoulders were thick and wide, wider than Marcus', and his bronzed arms muscular and strong. Eve's eyes moved over his face. His jaw was square, his nose straight, and his lips were curved in the faintest hint of a smile. He knew he was worshiped by the women and men alike, and he reveled in the power it afforded him.

Eve's gaze lingered momentarily on the smile that curved his lips. She was both startled and disgusted at the way it made her heart beat a little faster and her inner thighs begin to tingle. She was not like the other women and young girls who desired men like Rhonan.

"Eve?" Marcus was watching her with a smirk on his face.

She flushed and quickly looked away from the gladiator. "I wouldn't care if his eye turned to me or not." She insisted. Her insides were suddenly in turmoil and she didn't know why. "As I said, gladiators are brute beasts."

Marcus just smiled and nodded.

Understanding her brother all too well, Eve walked ahead in a bit of a huff, leaving him behind to linger with the rest of the crowd. She veered away from the procession, but found herself steadily drawn back into the

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flow townspeople as more and more joined the crowd. Young boys ran along beside the mounted gladiators, wooden swords and spears in their hands, eyes wide and bright. Young women swooned at the sight of the fighters, nearly fainting if by chance a gladiator looked at them directly. Eve shook her head. Silly, she thought, disgusted. She would never be a silly girl who swooned at the sight of-

A strong hand suddenly clamped onto her arm and yanked her back, nearly causing her to stumble. She gasped and spun to find a Centurion gripping her arm. Fear stabbed through her instinctively but abated when he said, "Careful." Then released her.

"Huh?" She turned when he nodded past her. Lost in her thoughts, she had almost walked right out in front of the procession. A huge horse sidestepped back and forth impatiently barely a few feet from her as the rider held it back. She looked up with wide eyes to find Rhonan staring down at her, one strong arm flexing massive muscles as he gripped the reins and prevented the large horse from going forward.

The procession had stopped behind Rhonan and Eve suddenly realized that all eyes were on her. She tried to back away and let the crowd swallow her, but instead of drawing her in, it formed a wall, preventing her from fleeing. She ducked her head respectfully. "Forgive me, My Lord." Her voice was barely audible even to her own ears and she nearly choked on her words. But she knew the consequences of showing disrespect to a man of Rhonan's stature.

"I believe the lady wishes to join us." Rhonan's deep masculine voice boomed in the afternoon air and echoed loudly through Eve's head. She looked up sharply. Before she could process what was happening, two soldiers stepped forward and began lifting her up onto Rhonan's steed.

"No." She cried as Rhonan drew her up in front of him and locked her in place with a strong, muscular arm. She looked around frantically and spotted Marcus on the outer edge of the crowd. He was laughing. She glared at him hard.

"Onward!" Rhonan shouted and sank his heels into his mount's sides. The large animal lunged forward in a burst of speed. The crowd cheered as the gladiators spurred their steeds and followed after their leader. Eve cried out and grabbed the gladiator's arm on reflex. His arm tightened around her as the horse raced down the stone street, its heavy hooves pounding against the hard surface. Eve gasped and tried to steady herself, suddenly too aware of her full breasts bouncing with each movement of the animal.

"Please." She gasped unsteadily. "Let me down."

His arm shifted and pressed up against her breasts. She stiffened, which only made matters worse, causing her to bounce harder in front of the powerful man. Her dress was riding up her thighs and each forward lunge of the steed thrust her back against the gladiator's crotch. A deep heat spread through her cheeks when she felt the hardness swelling there.

"Please." She cried again. "I-I need to get down."

It startled her when he actually slowed the horse to a walk then drew it to a halt. She was shaking as he helped her down, holding her hand firmly in his. Her feet touched the ground and her legs weakened. His hand gripped her more tightly and steadied her as he flashed her a smug smile. "Rhonan the gladiator invites you to be his honored guest tonight." He spoke loud enough for much of the crowd to hear. "Do you accept?"

His hand continued holding hers in his powerful grasp. What could she say? He was extending the invitation before all. It would be considered disrespectful if she refused and he knew it. She had to accept. He knew she had no other choice. "Yes, My Lord." She managed quietly. His smile widened just enough for her to see and

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his dark eyes flashed. He drew her hand up as he leaned down and kissed it lightly. Then she was free of him and he was moving on past her.

She could feel the eyes of the other women, the envy in them as each of them longed to take her place. She wished one of them could take her place. How had this happened? Was there a way to get out of it? But she had accepted the invitation publicly.

"And you said you didn't like the man."

Eve gasped and spun to find Marcus behind her, an infuriating grin stretching his lips. "That was not funny." She snapped and twisted on her heel to walk away from her brother. "Now I have to attend the festivities as *his* guest. What am I going to do?"

"Go." Marcus said, catching up to her. "Enjoy yourself for once."

"Enjoy myself?" She glanced at him incredulously. "How am I supposed to enjoy myself when I'm surrounded by drunken brutish men?"

"There isn't a woman here today who doesn't wish she was in your shoes."

"They can take my place." She huffed. "They can have my shoes. I don't want this *honor*." She surged ahead of her brother. Marcus watched her swim through the crowd away from him until she was swallowed up and he could no longer see her.

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The large horse's powerful muscles flexed with each movement of its body. Rhonan moved in perfect sync with the animal as it quick stepped down the stone street, its heavy hooves clacking loudly. The sound of armor and weapons clanked as the procession moved forward. The champion gladiator swept his eyes over the crowd and spotted the woman veering away from the procession, moving as quickly as she could through the thick hoard.

He smiled. The look in her eye when he pulled her up on his horse, when he publicly presented his invitation, she clearly despised him. It was obvious to him, if no other, that her acceptance was not her wish. The fire in her eyes had ignited a low burning ember deep inside him that had been slowly smoldering for what seemed eons. It had been a long time since a woman had resisted him, and he wasn't certain it had ever happened at all. But it had been even longer since a woman had set him ablaze the way this one had.

A slow, painful yet pleasurable ache spread through his groin. She had felt good sitting in front of him, her soft but firm buttocks bouncing wonderfully against his crotch. The heat of her large breasts still warmed his arm and enforced the ache spreading beyond his groin throughout his entire body. It had taken strength of will not to ride off with her and ravish her lovely body. But this woman was different from the ones who openly offered themselves to him. This one believed she didn't want him. She was certain that a man such as him merely repulsed her.

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Rhonan smiled again as he finally lost sight of her in the crowd. She believed much concerning him. And he would enjoy proving her wrong.

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"Why are you so upset?" Marcus asked.

Eve moved about the kitchen, agitated and desperately on edge. She was afraid if she didn't calm herself, she would begin dropping dishes. "He...did that purposely." She bit each word off forcefully. "He knew I couldn't decline his invitation if he offered it publicly."

Marcus pulled out a chair and sat down. "Why would you decline?"

"Why?" She nearly screeched. Her eyes spit fire at him. "You know how I feel about them. You know what kind of men they are. How could you encourage me to go to one?"

A slow, irritating smile curved Marcus' lips. "Maybe a man like that is just what you need."

"Wha..." Eve stared at him, eyes wide with shock. But the shock quickly transformed to lightning bolts. "How dare you imply..." She faltered as her anger disrupted her thoughts. "You...disgust me. You're no better than they are." She dropped the cloth she'd been about to wipe the table with. "Prepare your own meal." She stormed out of the kitchen.

In her room, Eve dropped on her bed and stared at the ceiling. What had she gotten herself into? She'd heard enough stories about the gladiators and their ways with women. If Rhonan was inviting her to the celebration, he was doing it for one reason. And how dare Marcus suggest she needed a man like that? Remaining unmarried, untouched, had been her choice. She'd had offers, if she wanted a man for such purposes, she could easily find one. She certainly didn't need a man like that. And if he thought she was going to fall beneath his spell like the foolish women in town...he was gravely mistaken.

She rolled onto her side and stared out the window at the darkness outside. Mental exhaustion forced her eyes closed and she slept, but her sleep was not peaceful or restful. It was filled with dreams of a bronzed skin gladiator who pursued her at every turn.

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She didn't recognize the room as she opened her eyes. The bed beneath her was large, with soft blankets and thick pillows. Willowy curtains danced in the warm breeze drifting through the open window. The breeze touched her skin and she realized she was naked. Candles burned sparsely around the room and the shadows outside the candlelight were deep and concealing. She sensed someone in those shadows, watching her.

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"Who's there?" She called quietly, uncertain. But there was no fear. She didn't feel in danger.

Movement in the shadows drew her eyes. A figure stepped forth, tall and muscular, bronzed skin...and nude. Eve drew back against the pillows as Rhonan approached the bed slowly, eyeing her the way a predator might eye its prey. Yet still she felt no threat.

"My lady." He murmured as his dark eyes moved over her naked body with the power and intensity of a physical touch. Eve trembled. Her skin tingled. An unbidden ache crept through her.

"My lord." She heard the whispered words fall softly from her own lips. When the gladiator stepped up close to the bed, her heated gaze slid down his thick, bronze chest and lower to linger on the evidence of his intense arousal. She was a virgin. She had never been with a man this way. She had been held and kissed, but no more. It had been her choice to remain untouched. But as this powerful man stood before her, his hunger and desire for her fully undeniable, she found herself longing for him to take her, to be the one to introduce her to the passions of the flesh.

He placed one knee on the bed then reached for her. His strong hands gripped her ankles firmly and he slowly pulled her down the bed to him. He rubbed his hands down the inside of her legs and caressed her inner thighs before opening her legs and stepping in between them.

Eve's heart raced. A slight dizziness invaded her head. Every nerve in her body surfaced and she felt her nipples harden fiercely, almost painfully. Rhonan's hot gaze came to rest on her full breasts, her hard nipples. He wrapped one of her legs around his waist as he slid his hand back up to the ankle of the other leg and stretched it open wider. He stepped in even closer and touched her moist center with the swollen head of his erection. Her heart shuddered then quickened as a whole new sensation spiraled through her. He shifted his gaze from her breasts to her eyes as he pressed his hips forward. Eve gasped as the large head squeezed inside her, opening her to him in a way she'd never been open to a man before. He held her eyes as he steadily pushed his thick, hard erection deeper inside her, stealing more of her breath. There was a sensation of pain as his thickness filled her up and stretched her caverns to capacity and then some. But it quickly dissipated and was replaced by a sensation she never knew existed.

When she felt him sink in to the bottom, she realized she'd never felt more owned by a man that she did at that moment, as if he were taking possession of her. To her surprise, the idea of this man possessing her excited her senses.

Rhonon released her ankle and leaned over her, flattening his hands on the bed on each side of her. He continued to stare down into her heated eyes, but said nothing as his hips drew back a little and she felt his thick dick pulling out of her, sliding away until just the plump head remained inside her. Rather than withdrawing completely, he drove his dick back in, not too fast, but faster than the first time. He hit bottom firmly and Eve gasped again, then he was pulling out once more, driving back in, pulling, driving, thrusting until Eve's body was arching to him and cries fell from her lips. Her hands gripped his thick, muscular forearms and her nails dug into his flesh as her cries grew louder, sharper. Her body felt like it was on fire as a force swelled inside her.

A sheen of sweat glistening his bronze skin, Rhonan thrust himself into her again and again, his breath quick but not labored as his intense eyes bored into hers. The louder she cried out the harder he thrust, the swollen head of his dick beating at her, insisting she give him what he wanted. A sudden, sharp gasp escaped her as her orgasm burst. He thrust harder, faster. Before the effect of the orgasm had a chance to subside, another exploded on its tail. She cried out and dug her nails into his arms as her body arched fiercely, her hips thrusting up to him. An intensity tightened his face as his rhythm quickened and he came at her with more urgency. Suddenly, he threw back his head and released what sounded to Eve like a battle cry. He thrust in

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deep and held it as his hot seed poured into her.

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Eve came awake with a start, her heart racing, her skin damp with sweat, her head spinning. She could feel the creamy wetness between her thighs. The dream flashed through her head again on instant replay. She trembled and lay back down on her pillow. Her whole body tingled and she could still feel Rhonan inside her. His massive thickness filling her up, stroking her, thrusting into her. That sensation hit her again, shuddering through her whole body.

She couldn't go to the celebration with him. She couldn't be near him again. Not now. Not after that dream. How could she even look him in the eye without him seeing the turmoil inside her? And in detecting it, he would use it to his own advantage. And Eve feared she would be helpless against him. She would respectfully decline, that's all there was to it.

She wouldn't go.

She couldn't.

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"What is this?" Eve stared at the neatly wrapped package on the table. It hadn't been there last night when she'd stormed out of the kitchen.

"It arrived early this morning by courier." Marcus said as he pulled on his boots.

"But what is it?" Eve asked suspiciously. "Who is it from?"

Marcus snapped his foot into his boot then looked at his sister. "Who would be your first guess?"

A tension tightened Eve's face. The dream came back full force then spun away as she forced it out of her head. "I don't want it."

"You don't even know what it is." Marcus said standing up. "You should at least open it before you decide whether or not you want it."

"If it's from...him." Eve snapped. "I don't want it."

"Why not?"

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She shook her head. "What is with you?" She asked sharply. "Why are you in favor of this? Why are you on his side?"

Marcus shrugged and grinned. Such an annoying, infuriating grin. "Maybe I just feel for the man." He said. "He's trying to win your affection and you're fighting him every step of the way."

Eve's jaw dropped. "Win my affection?" She trembled on the verge of punching her brother. "It is not my affection he is interested in and you know it. Men like that-

"Men like what?" Marcus cut in suddenly. "Tell me, Eve, what do you really know about men like that? When was the last time you were pursued by a gladiator?"

Eve was seething. "I am not a fool, Marcus. Everyone knows how the gladiators are with their women. I am not going to be some brutish man's chattel."

"Rumors." Marcus said. "That's all they are. How do you know such rumors are true? Do you know a woman who has been with a gladiator?"

A frustrated sigh escaped Eve. "Just...don't even talk to me about this anymore. I've already decided I'm not going. But I will be polite and respectful and sent an official decline to his invitation along with an apology."

Marcus shook his head and smiled. "Wow. You really are attracted to the man, aren't you?"

"How..." Eve faltered, incredulous. "How could you possibly come to such a conclusion?"

"Well." Marcus explained. "If you had no attraction to the man, you wouldn't be so scared to accompany him to the celebration. You would go, get it over with, and be done with it." He smiled darkly. "But you're terrified to be near him. And not because you think he's going to harm you."

Eve glared at him, her chest heaving. "I simply do not want to go." She bit off each word sharply.

"Yes, of course." Marcus eyed her knowingly as he plucked his coat off a wall hook and slipped it on. "Whatever was I thinking." He flashed her a grin and slipped outside before she could start hurling objects at him.

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"Sir, a message arrived for you." The young house boy stood back as Rhonan completed the skillful swing of his sword then lowered the weapon and shoved it in its sheath. The kid held out the neatly folded paper.

Rhonon wiped the sweat from his face and took the paper from the boy. His torso was shirtless and gleaming with the force of his practice. He unfolded the paper and read the message. It was from the woman he'd extended the invitation to. She was respectfully, apologetically declining. Her name was at the bottom; Eve. He liked that.

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Refolding the message, he handed it back to the boy. "Do you wish to reply, sir?" The boy asked.

Rhonan withdrew his sword again. "No."

The boy nodded and walked away. Rhonan raised the sword before him, clutching the handle with both hands. He smiled. He would deliver his reply personally.

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The heavy knock on the door reached Eve as she sank down into the bathing water. A curtain blocked her view of the other room. Whoever it was could come back later. Her body ached from tension and stress. She just wanted to relax and let the peace of not having to accompany Rhonan tonight seep through her.

The knock came again. Louder this time.

Go away, she silently pleaded. She closed her eyes, willing the knocking to stop. She waited. Nothing. A sigh of relief escaped her and she relaxed back, her eyes remaining closed. She didn't want to see anyone, hear anyone, she just wanted to-

"Should have answered the door." A deep voice suddenly filled the small bathing room. Eve's eyes snapped open as she cried out, startled. Rhonan was standing in the doorway, the curtain shoved aside.

"What..." Eve started as she sank lower in the deep tub. "What are you doing in my house? Get out!"

Rhonan didn't budge. He leaned casually against the door frame, his strong arms crossed over his chest. "Why did you decline?" His eyes moved to the tub and her naked body beneath the water.

Feeling extremely exposed and vulnerable, Eve crossed her arms over her bare breasts. "I don't want to go." Her voice was unsteady and she hated that, but she couldn't keep the tremor out of it.

"But you accepted." He reminded her. "In public. Why didn't you decline when I extended the invitation."

Eve swallowed tightly as she huddle down in the tub. "Everyone was watching me. I-I felt obligated to accept."

"Or maybe." Rhonan pushed off the door frame and took a step into the room. "You really do want to go...but you're just afraid."

He sounded just like Marcus. What was wrong with these men? "No." She said quietly, too aware that he was a bit closer. "I really don't want to go. So please leave my home."

He came a little closer, his probing eyes gaining a better view. She drew her knees up to her chest to conceal her most intimate parts. "I'll leave." He murmured as his gaze traveled over her body. "If you can give me a

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satisfactory reason as to why you don't want to accompany me."

She chanced a look at his face. Images from the dream rose unbidden in her mind. She saw again the intensity in his eyes, on his face as he took possession of her so completely. She felt the heat rush to her cheeks as she looked away quickly. "I..."

"Be honest." He said. "I do want the truth."

The problem was, she wasn't certain anymore what the truth was. "I-I...don't like you." She managed weakly. She had thought that was true, but now...after that dream...

"Me?" He pointed to himself. "You don't like me?"

She was stuck with her answer now. She had to back it up. "I don't like...men like you." She wasn't feeling the conviction of her words and she was sure he wasn't missing that. But she pushed forward anyway. "I don't like gladiators."

"Why is that?" He was slowly moving closer. "Has a gladiator mistreated you?"

She sucked her knees up tighter. "No." She whispered. "I just think it's brutish to fight and kill for sport...for entertainment."

"You do know." He said. "That not every gladiator who enters the arena does so by choice. Not all are free."

Eve glanced at him. "You are. But still you fight." She looked away. "You're prideful and arrogant, and you enjoy the way others worship you."

"Hmm." He raised an eyebrow. "How is it you know so much about me, having just met me yesterday?"

"I don't have to know you." Eve said quietly. "To see it."

Rhonon nodded slowly and moved even closer. "Well, since you're so good at reading me...interpret this." In a movement so quick Eve barely registered he had moved at all, Rhonon grasp her arms and lifted her to her feet. A small, sharp scream flew from her lips but it was quickly stifled by his mouth crushing hers. He held her naked, wet body against him as his tongue delved deep into her mouth. Her whole body came alive against her will and she knew there was no way he couldn't feel it in her.

His grip on her arms softened as his hands slid around her and flattened against her back, then caressed lower until he was cupping both firm butt cheeks. Her breasts were crushed against his chest and her nipples hardened fiercely. The moan surfaced in her throat before she could resist it. Her hands trembled against his chest as he devoured her mouth with a hunger that was contagious. Suddenly, his mouth tore free from hers and dropped to her throat. He bit and sucked at the tender flesh, stealing another moan from deep within her. His grip on her butt tightened and he pulled her more firmly against him. Even through his pants, she could feel his raging erection.

One hand released her back side and came up to cup one of her breasts. His head ducked and his hot mouth covered her hard nipple. He sucked it hard, like a man starving. Eve gasped then released a small cry.

Rhonon's other hand released her butt cheek then delved lower, between her thighs and found her moist center. She gasped, startled, as his fingertips began to stroke her, instantly fueling the fire already burning inside her. The cries quickly intensified and came more frequently as he stroked her towards climax while his

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hungry mouth worked on her breast.

She was clutching at him, gasping, the orgasm swelling fast - when he suddenly released her and stepped back. Her eyes were hazy as was her head. For a moment she didn't know what had happened. Rhonan stood back a couple feet, his eyes burning, his breath quick, as he stared at her. Her legs were too weak to stand and she sank back down into the water.

"I'll send a carriage for you tonight." His voice was thick, heavy with passion. "Be ready." He turned and walked away. A moment later, the front door banged as he left her home. She heard the sound of a horse then heavy, rapid hoof beats quickly fade into the distance.

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The horse's hooves beat the dirt road like four hammers as Rhonan kicked it hard. He rode fast but not fast enough. The fierce ache in his crotch was growing worse and he urged the horse to move faster, as if he were trying to outrun the overwhelming need inflaming him. But there was no escaping it and the faster and harder he rode, the more painful it became for him.

He slowed the steed to a walk then halted him completely. Rhonan dismounted. The raging erection between his legs was too massive to ride comfortably in the saddle. It hurt to walk but it hurt worse to ride. And it only seemed to swell and harden more with each passing thought of Eve. He could still taste her hard nipple in his mouth, feel her creamy wetness on his fingertips. She had been bare moments from an orgasm, but if he had brought her all the way - he would still be back there, the two of them coupling like frenzied animals on her bed.

"Oh god." He groaned aloud and dropped the horse's reins. The large animal halted instantly. Rhonan bent over, gripping his knees hard as he drew deep breaths but the fierce burning ache in his groin was unbearable. "Fuck..." He trembled and half walked, half limped off the road and behind a large tree. He leaned back against the tree and closed his eyes as he worked open the front of his pants. He pulled out his raging hard cock and began to stroke it vigorously, his chest heaving.

His breath quickened rapidly as sweat broke out all over his skin. His strong hand whipped up and down the steel hard shaft of his dick as his knees began to tremble and weaken. He gripped harder, beat faster. His chest tightened fiercely and he wondered if his heart would give out before he came.

A sudden roar burst from deep down in his throat and he threw his head back. His cock exploded, squirting powerful shots of cum into the air. He gasped hard and pumped his dick until his balls were empty. But when he stuffed it back in his pants, it was still hard and his hunger was still burning hot, but at least maybe now he could actually ride back to town.

He mounted his steed and urged him on down the road. Images of the woman's face flashed behind his eyes. Her scent filled his nostrils. And his cock responded. He wanted to believe he was the one in control, but there was something about this woman that made him want to kneel before and fulfill her every command.

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Chapter 2

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"I thought you weren't going?"

Eve stood before the oval mirror and stared at her reflection. Marcus leaned against the door frame, watching her.

"What happened to respectfully declining?"

Eve studied her appearance in the mirror without answering her brother. Her hair was pulled up and pinned, but for a few tendrils framing her face. Her skin was freshly washed, and glowed. The dress that had been delivered fit her perfectly, elegantly. She'd never worn anything so elegant or lovely. But she had to wonder why a man like Rhonan would bother dressing her up just so he could dress her down again. What did he care what dress she wore if he planned on leaving it in a heap by his bed anyway?

"Eve?"

Eve slowly turned her eyes from the mirror to her brother. "What?" she asked low, soft.

"I asked what happened to you respectfully declining Rhonan's invitation?"

Turning away from Marcus, Eve said, "I accepted his invitation publicly. It would be rude and in bad taste to back out."

"That isn't what you said this morning." Marcus pointed out. "What changed your mind?"

Eve gazed at her reflection. What could she say that would satisfy Marcus? She couldn't tell him the truth - not ever. What would he think of Rhonan coming to their house and...making himself at home? He would probably think it was perfectly all right. After all, didn't she *need* a man like Rhonan?

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Marcus pressed, and Eve wished he would just go away. She couldn't lie to him, she had never been able to. She had to tell him at least a partial truth, or not say anything at all. And if she said nothing, he would needle her until she gave it up.

"What does it matter why I changed my mind?" She said, avoiding his question. "You wanted me to go and I'm going."

"Yes." Marcus spoke slowly, eyeing her suspiciously. "But you were quite emphatic about not going. *Something* had to have happened that made you decide otherwise."

A flurry of butterflies filled Eve's stomach. She was uneasy and nervous enough without her brother hounding her for details. Nausea simmered inside her. Could she really go through with this? And if she didn't...how would Rhonan retaliate? He clearly wasn't a man who liked to be told no to.

Marcus snapped his fingers in front of Eve's face and she flinched. "What?" She asked with exasperation.

"You're hiding something from me." It wasn't a question. "Does little Eve have a secret?"

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"No." Eve answered a bit too fast and with too much emphasis. She may as well have yelled out *Yes!*

Marcus stepped towards her and poked at her with his index fingers, prodding and teasing. "I think you do have a secret."

Eve flinched away each time he poked her. "Stop it, Marcus. I do not."

He kept it up, tickling as he poked. "Come on, tell me. It's got to be good if you're so determined not to tell me."

Eve wriggled away from his assault. "Stop it." The seriousness in her voice halted him.

Marcus backed away, holding his hands up a bit defensively. "Okay." He turned and headed for the doorway.

Guilt stabbed at Eve and she wanted to scream. She didn't need this right now. But she loved her brother and it really bothered her when she felt like she'd hurt his feelings somehow.

"Marcus." Eve tried to call him back but he was already gone. She stared at her herself in the mirror and sighed heavily. "God, please just let this night be over."

When the carriage arrived just after dark, Eve wasn't anywhere near ready to face Rhonan again. She longed for Marcus to put his arms around her and tell her everything would be fine, as he always did. But tonight, he'd made himself scarce. She was on her own.

The carriage ride into town seemed to take only minutes, though Eve knew it had to have been much longer. As the carriage rumbled and bounced up over the cobblestone bridge that was the entrance to the town, Eve's stomach pinched fiercely with anxiety and unease. She hadn't eaten all day, so there was nothing to come up, but that didn't prevent her stomach from wanting to try and purge itself.

She tried to console herself as the carriage bumped over the stone street, carrying her closer and closer to the one man she both feared and desired the most. Perhaps Marcus had been right and all the rumors she'd heard about the gladiators were just that - rumors. But the memory of her encounter with Rhonan at her home earlier that same day convinced her that the rumors were true. Rhonan clearly believed he had a right to take what he wanted, when he wanted it.

Even tensed even more as the carriage drew to a stop. Rhonan might think she was an easy conquest. But Eve was determined to prove the gladiator dead wrong.

9

Rhonon stood at the east window of his chambers, hands clasp casually behind his back. He watched the carriage arrive. When the driver opened the carriage door, Eve stepped out, wearing the gown he'd sent her. Even from a great distance away, he could detect the tension gripping her.

The carriage driver walked her into the large hall where the gaieties had already begun. Rhonan remained at the window after Eve had moved out of his sight. He realized his hands were now clasped tightly together behind his back and a tightness gripped his muscles. His pulse was racing. How was it that this woman could have such an effect on him? Was it simply because she had resisted him when all other women fell at his feet?

Rhonon closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, held it then released it slowly. It wasn't merely her resistance of him that had so captivated both his body and mind. It was something else, something more. But

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he had yet to figure out just what it was.

The sudden knock at the door was expected, and he turned slowly. "Enter."

A young male servant entered and paused just inside the doorway. "Sir, Lady Eve has arrived."

Rhonon nodded. The young servant gave him a brief, respectful bow and left the room.

A new tension gripped Rhonon. He turned back to the window. A low throb settled in his crotch, causing his dick to harden and his balls tingle. Just that one quick glimpse of her leaving the carriage, hair pulled up away from her lovely face, the way the dress hugged her shapely body...just that alone was nearly more than he could handle. It would take every ounce of his will to control himself once in her presence.

A low groan rose in his throat as the throbbing in his crotch intensified. The tingling sensation in his balls was spreading down through his thighs, making his legs feel weak. How could he face her like this? Could he even walk straight with his cock so hard it felt like a chunk of steel between his legs?

He gripped the stone sill of the window and groaned tightly.

"M'Lord?"

Rhonon spun around, startled by the sudden presence. He stared hard at the young woman standing in the door, a metal pitcher in her hands. She recoiled a bit from the hard look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, M'Lord." She spoke low, submissive. "I don't mean to intrude. Do you require any services before you join the festivities?"

Rhonon started to wave her away, taking a step forward. He was instantly reminded of his uncomfortable condition when his swollen dick inhibited his movement. If he faced Eve in this condition, he would prove her right about the forcefulness of Gladiators. He wouldn't be able to contain himself.

"I do." Rhonon spoke thickly. He motioned her inside. "Please, close the door."

The young woman shut the door then came forward and set the water pitcher on the table.

Rhonon approached her a bit stiffly and moved around behind her. He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent then reached down and lifted the back of her dress. He urged her to lean over the edge of the table. She did so without resistance. The female servants were well aware of their duties to the men they served.

Bunching the dress up around her waist, Rhonon rubbed his hands slowly down over her firm ass. He opened his eyes and unfastened the front of his garment, loosing his throbbing cock. He stepped forward and thrust his dick into her pussy hard and deep, burying every thick inch in her tight, welcoming body. She gasped sharply. Rhonon groaned thickly and closed his eyes again, envisioning Eve, the way her wet, naked body had felt in his hands...her rounded breasts sweet in his mouth...her warm, creamy pussy against his fingertips.

Rhonon released a strangled growl and began to thrust his swollen cock into the woman's tight pussy, pulling her hips back against him as he fucked her harder. Her inner pussy muscles squeezed and sucked at his dick as he drove it into her relentlessly, rocking her against the table and moving the table itself.

The young woman gasped loudly and moaned as Rhonon's cock assaulted her pussy. Rhonon's eyes were squeezed tightly shut as he grunted and growled through a clenched jaw and fucked her with increasing

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intensity, stabbing her with his dick until a mind shattering sensation tightened his balls and spiraled through his lower abdomen.

Rhonan roared loud and slammed his cock deep inside her pussy, holding it as he exploded forcefully, filling her with hot cum. He gripped her hips fiercely and fucked her fast and erratic as he emptied his balls completely.

A deep shuddering breath escaped Rhonan and he stepped back, tugging his cock from the servant girl's wet pussy. Thick cum oozed out of her opening, a stringy line still connected to the head of his dick. His balls were empty but his member remained very heavy. He shoved it back inside his garments then lowered the young woman's dress.

"That'll be all." He rasped thickly.

"M'Lord." She bowed and left the room.

Rhonan drew in another deep breath and released it slow. Eve was waiting for him downstairs. Only now was he ready to face her, confident he could remain in control of himself.

Chapter 3

10

Eve sat tensely next to Rhonan at his place of honor. The massive, heavy oak table stretched away to her right and left and was abundantly arrayed with unlimited options of meats, breads, fruits and vegetables. Eve had never seen so much food on one table - albeit an extremely large table.

Rhonon sat close on her left, but was engaged in a loud, raucous conversation with another gladiator sitting on the other side of him. Eve was thankful for the lack of attention and tried to disappear into the large chair beneath her. Another bulging gladiator dropped gracelessly into the seat on her right, bumping into her and knocking her against Rhonan's arm, pulling a scantily clad woman into his lap. Eve had seen her with the women lingering around the entrance and knew what she was.

"You're not hungry?"

Flinching, Eve looked away from the drunk gladiator and his wench, and met Rhonan's piercing eyes. She had yet to add food to her empty plate, and the very thought of it made her stomach churn.

"I, uh...no...not really."

"Some fruit?" He suggested. His eyes bore into her and she wanted to look away but felt as if he was physically holding her stare. "It's quite...succulent." At the word *succulent*, his eyes did a quick leap to her breasts and back to her eyes in a movement so swift she barely caught it. But she did see it and that tiny flick of his eyes was enough to set her pulse aflutter like a flurry of butterflies in her chest.

To appease him, she reached for a plump strawberry and took a small bite. A bit of the juice stained her lower lip and before she could lick it off, Rhonan leaned in quick and sucked her lower lip clean. She gasped lightly, startled by his sudden, bold move. The butterflies metamorphosed into small, frantic birds as his warm mouth lingered against her lower lip, his breath drifting between her slightly parted lips and intoxicating her.

"Succulent." He affirmed in a low murmur then drew back and turned away, resuming his banter with the other gladiator as if he'd never left the conversation.

Eve's chest heaved as she struggled to breathe. Her heart beat fiercely against her ribcage. She closed her eyes briefly and willed her pulse to calm. It only partially obeyed, but threatened to race away again when she recalled the feel of Rhonan's mouth tugging at her lower lip. She opened her eyes to dispel the recent memory, but it refused to relinquish its grip on her. A tingling sensation crept up her inner thighs and settled in her most intimate spot, creating a low, throbbing ache. Her nipples hardened instantly and she was thankful for the dim lighting and the fact that Rhonan was faced the other way.

She glanced at the back of his head as he roared with laughter at something the other gladiator said. She despised him for his calm, light demeanor. He was entirely at ease while she sat there, tense, rigid, her body slowly setting on fire against her will. She'd known better than to come here tonight. To be here with *him*. Her encounter with him that morning told her she was in over head with this man. She had no control. If he so chose to lay her out on the table right then and there and ravish her before all...she was certain she would not be able to resist.

Her eyes lingered on the nape of his neck where his dark curled ever so slightly. His neck and shoulder muscles were well defined and flexed with the tiniest of movement. Why did that make the ache down below

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intensify to an agonizing degree?

11

Her eyes were burning into his skin like hot coals but still Rhonan refused to look at her. His little act of sucking the strawberry juice from her lip had nearly backfired on him. He'd meant to ignite Eve's inner fire and set himself ablaze instead. His momentary release with the servant girl had proved useless, because the moment he'd entered the large hall and saw Eve, his dick had instantly turned to granite once more.

And now, after tasting Eve's mouth, it felt like a marble pillar between his legs. He wanted desperately to take Eve to his chambers and spend the rest of the night exploring her body, tasting every inch of her, satisfying them both over and over again until they fell asleep from pure exhaustion.

A drop of wetness seeped from his swollen cockhead and slid down his thigh. Would it take just a mere look at her now to push him over the edge? His balls were like stones and could hold no more. If she so much as batted an eye at him, he was certain his cock would explode.

He tried to focus on what Gabriel was saying, nodding and roaring with laughter when it seemed appropriate, but every sense he possessed was fully conscious of Eve sitting next to him.

And he could feel her body coming alive by the moment.

12

The wench squealed suddenly. Eve flinched hard and looked at the couple beside her. The woman was sitting in the gladiator's lap, facing away from him. The man had tugged open the front of her dress and was clutching her large, exposed breasts. He grunted loud and shifted hard in his chair. The wench gasped. Against her will, Eve glanced down to see the woman's dress bunched up around her waist, her lower half bare and exposed. The gladiator was ramming his hard cock into her pussy.

Eve sucked in a quick, shocked breath and the gladiator looked at her and grinned. "You want the next ride?" He drawled with a drunken slur and grinned wider as he thrust harder at the wench in his lap. His eyes suddenly slid past Eve and his grin faded in an instant.

Frowning, Eve turned her head slowly to find Rhonan shooting the other gladiator a deadly look. The man looked away from Eve and focused his full attention on fucking his whore. Rhonan's hard eyes took in the scene for a moment then he met Eve's stare briefly. The look he gave her set her on fire and she felt a warm wetness forming between her thighs. His attention shifted and rested momentarily on her breasts where her nipples had hardened fiercely and pressed out firmly against her dress. For a quick moment, Eve expected him to start grabbing her and using her the way the other gladiator was using the wench. But once again, Rhonan returned his attention to the gladiator on his left and resumed his conversation.

What am I doing here? Why did he even want me here?

The wench cried out sharply and bounced hard on the gladiator's cock as he fucked her with force. Eve kept her eyes averted, but the sound of their coupling was like throwing coal on a fire and she began to grow steadily hotter and hotter inside.

Beads of sweat formed on Eve's brow as the wench began to moan and gasp in a loud, steady crescendo as her orgasm swelled with strength. Eve's inner thighs were wet and growing wetter as the gladiator began to grunt and growl and drive his cock into the whore's pussy. Their fucking was noisome and wet as the man's hips

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slapped against the wench's pussy and ass.

Eve's hands squeezed into tight fists in her lap as she forced her eyes to look anywhere but at the heated mating session right beside her. The gladiator's thick, muscular arm bumped her repeatedly as he clutched the woman's hips and bounced her on his dick. Eve tried to draw away from the man's arm, but if she slid over anymore, she would be pressed up against Rhonan. And at that precise moment, she wasn't certain what would happen if she touched him, felt the heat of his strong body against her.

She tried closing her eyes and forcing the image of the gladiator and his wench from her mind's eye, but in their place she saw Rhonan and herself, as they were in her dream, Rhonan hovering over the top of her as he stroked her pussy with his thick cock, pleasuring her in a way no man ever had.

A shudder rushed through Eve as a soft, involuntary gasp escaped her throat. She clamped her mouth shut and held her breath, praying Rhonan hadn't noticed. He was still turned away, clearly unaware that the mere brush of his hand just now would bring her to climax.

Eve shuddered again as the wench cried out sharply and peaked as the gladiator threw back his head and roared loud, ramming his cock deep inside her and holding it there as he came with extreme force.

Eve closed her eyes again and trembled on the verge of orgasm herself. *Oh god...please don't let this happen.* She squeezed her eyes shut tighter and willed her body to relax, to not lose control. And for a brief moment, she felt herself regaining control...then Rhonan's hand came to rest on her leg beneath the table.

A powerful shudder racked Eve's body. She kept her eyes closed, her hands balled in her lap, as Rhonan's battle roughened hand slowly worked beneath her dress and flattened on her bare thigh, his fingertips lightly gripping her warm skin.

The frenzied birds were back, trapped inside her ribcage, beating at her chest.

Chapter 4

13

Her heated flesh burned into his fingertips. It hadn't been Rhonan's intention to touch her this way, not yet anyway. But he'd been too aware of Isaac and his whore on the other side of Eve. Usually he ignored the other men and their women, but tonight Eve was sitting beside him, nearly touching him, and it had been too much for him.

The tension in Eve's body only made him want her more. He could feel the struggle in her, the conflict of emotions and desires. She fought him, but she hungered for him as well. There was no doubt in his mind about that.

He could feel the creamy wetness dampening her inner thigh. His hand squeezed firmly as the urge to plunge into her hot, moist center nearly overwhelmed him. A severe ache gripped his balls and swelled his cock to painful proportion. An agonized groan clawed at his throat but he forced it down, swallowing hard.

I don't like men like you.

Eve's words from earlier that day suddenly flashed through his mind, ricocheting off the insides of his skull, making his temples throb. He glanced over the top of Eve's ducked head, his eyes falling on Isaac and his wench. They were no longer fucking, but Isaac's hands were still all over the woman, fondling, exploring. As he watched, Isaac shoved the wench down under the table between his legs, grabbed his heavy cock in one fist and a handful of the woman's hair in the other, and shoved his dick into her mouth. She took it without resistance and began to suck and stroke him with what appeared to be eagerness.

Rhonan's chest heaved as he watched the woman's mouth slide up and down the other gladiator's cock, her cheeks depressing as she sucked hard on each backstroke. A steady drizzle of pre-cum trickled down Rhonan's leg. The unbearable ache in his groin was spreading up through his stomach, his chest and up into his jaw. His head pounded as his heart beat violently at the inside of his chest. His hand squeezed Eve's leg harder, his fingertips slipping in the wetness of her inner thigh. He felt her flinch and forced his grip to ease up.

Isaac forced his cock deeper into the wench's mouth. She gagged a bit but Isaac didn't notice. Or more likely, didn't care as he continued to fuck her mouth without any regard to the woman's comfort.

Rhonan looked away, feeling a disgust for the man. But as his hand retained its grip on Eve's thigh, he wondered how different he was from the other gladiator. The fierce ache between his legs urged him relentlessly to give in to his base desires, to just take what he wanted. He'd done it before. He felt no pride in it, but he had sank to the level where he was functioning on animal instinct alone. And he realized - that's what Eve expected of him now.

His fingertips moved against her skin ever so slightly, the warm wetness slick against his fingers. She wouldn't resist him. A part of her longed for him to thrust his fingers into her aching pussy and fuck her to orgasm again and again. For a brief moment, she would welcome his touch, lose herself in the pleasure and ecstasy.

But only for a moment. Afterwards...

He would have proved himself to be exactly what she'd told him he was.

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The kind of man she didn't like.

14

A shudder ran through Eve's body. It was too surfaced for Rhonan not to feel it too. His hand burned against her thigh, each tiny movement of his fingertips sending shock waves straight into her heated core. Her body ached, every inch of her skin tingling hotly as if tiny sparks were raining down on her. She could focus on little else but Rhonan's masculine hand gripping her leg. What was he waiting for?

Movement to her right drew her eye. She'd tried hard not to watch the woman beneath the table, what she was doing to the gladiator. It filled her with disgust and made her stomach churn. She looked away but kept her head ducked low. She couldn't look at Rhonan either. If he looked into her eyes, saw how desperately she wanted to feel his hand pressed against her pussy, his strong fingers stroking her aching, fevered body...

A second shudder ran through her. What might feel good at first could very quickly escalate into...

A muffled gagging drew her eyes back to the wench beside her. The gladiator was grunting low and pushing his cock deep into the woman's mouth, over and over. Her eyes were wide, bulging. She was no longer sucking his cock but simply trying to accommodate it as it swelled thicker and longer, and thrust into her throat with force. She wasn't enjoying it anymore. Her eyes flicked and caught Eve's stare. Tears filled the woman's eyes and trickled down her face as the gladiator violated her mouth without mercy.

Eve trembled, but this time it wasn't brought on by sexual need. She trembled in horror...and rage. How could a man - *any man* - treat a woman this way? The wench had ceased to be a willing participant in the gladiator's sex play, and had now become a mere tool in which he was using to satisfy his own selfish lust.

Eve wasn't certain just when Rhonan removed his hand, but she realized quite suddenly that it was no longer gripping her thigh. Why he had withdrawn was a mystery to her, but of little consequence at the moment as she she stared wide-eyed at the woman being assaulted by the gladiator next to her. The woman's wet eyes began to slightly roll back in her head, gagging harder as the man gripped her hair in a tight, powerful fist and fucked her mouth with driving force, grunting and growling as his own orgasm swelled.

The sob rose so suddenly in Eve's throat it choked her. Tears slid from her eyes. The words were on her tongue and falling from her lips before she could think to pull them back as they tumbled free in a shuddering whimper.

15

"Stop it."

Rhonon barely heard the words slip from Eve's lips. Had his hand still been on her leg, he would have been certain she was speaking to him. But he had taken it away. His hunger for her was immense, nearly unbearable, but unlike Isaac and many others like him, Rhonan received greater sexual satisfaction when he knew he was pleasuring the woman, and not merely himself.

Eve's words drew his eyes to her face. His brow pinched hard in confusion as he watched the tears sliding down her face, the horrified look resonating from her. But then he followed her wide-eyed stare to the woman planted between Isaac's legs. The woman's hair was balled tightly in the man's fist as he forced her mouth onto his cock while he thrust in deep...too deep for the woman to handle. Her eyes were rolling back and tears streaked her face. She was gagging, unable to catch her breath.

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A new heat rose up inside Rhonan and began to boil his blood.

16

Eve didn't see Rhonan leave his chair, his movement so sudden and swift that he was already behind the other gladiator, his powerful arm around the man's throat and dragging him from his seat before Eve could even register what was happening.

Rhonan ripped the gladiator from his chair with more strength than Eve had ever seen in one man. Her airway suddenly cleared, the wench dropped to the floor, her face against the cold stone, gasping and choking. Fresh tears streaked her face and her hair was a messy, tangled ball. Her hands trembled badly as she tried to pull the front of her dress over her exposed breasts.

Shock nailed Eve to her chair, her mind reeling as she looked quickly from the woman to Rhonan. He threw the gladiator onto the floor hard. The man released a roar of rage and lunged to his feet like a lion attacking its prey. Rhonan brought his muscular arm up and nailed the man in the side of the head with his elbow, dropping him back to the stone floor with a heavy thud. The gladiator managed to get to his hands and knees, teetered, then staggered to his feet again. His face twisted in rage as he ripped his sword from its sheath and swung it around hard at Rhonan's head. A loud clank of steel striking steel echoed through the expansive hall as Rhonan's blade met it before it even came close to slicing flesh.

Rhonan's blade was steady, the muscles in his arms flexed tight, bulging as he gripped his sword like the champion he was. His face was hard, his eyes harder, as he stared down his opponent with the confidence that he could take the man out in a moment's notice.

"Do you *really* want to do this?" Rhonan's voice was low, deadly, resonating a strength and power that made Eve tremble...and her whole body shudder with sexual excitement.

The gladiator held his ground, his eyes stony with determination. But as if suddenly realizing who he was standing blade to blade with, he lowered his sword and sheathed it, stepping back. He glanced at the woman still on the floor.

Rhonan held his blade in place. "You've had enough...of everything." Rhonan spoke low, his masculine voice deep and laced with threat. "Go sleep it off."

Eve could only stare in shock as the man stumbled away, drunken and beaten. She slowly lowered her eyes to the woman then left her chair and knelt beside her, helping her with her disheveled dress. The woman seemed shocked by Eve's gentleness and care.

"*Thank...you.*" The woman whispered unsteadily.

Eve gazed at her through a well of fresh tears. "Why are you here with these men?" Eve asked quietly, her voice thick as the tears tightened her throat. She helped the woman to her feet.

"Why are you?" The woman wondered with quiet sincerity. She squeezed Eve's hand gently then glanced briefly at Rhonan, bowed respectfully and hurried away.

Eve swallowed thickly as she watched the woman make her way through the hoard of guests and disappear out into the dark night. Eve turned slowly and looked at Rhonan. He still gripped his sword tightly in his hand. His eyes were as hard as the steel of his blade as they bore into her. The woman's words fluttered through Eve's head.

Why are you?

Chapter 5

* Sorry this isn't very long :(

17

"Bravo!"

Rhonon's stony eyes snapped past Eve and drilled into the man who had suddenly approached the table. Anxiety gripped him and his fist tightened around the handle of the sword.

"Admirable sword play, my friend." The man was speaking to Rhonon but his leering eyes were feasting on Eve. "But hardly suitable conduct in the presence of a lady."

His face tight, Rhonon merely glared at the man. Two well muscled gladiators stood at the man's guard, each sporting a brand burned into the flesh of their upper arms.

"Perhaps the lady would prefer more civilized company."

Rhonon stepped forward suddenly, drawing Eve back by the arm as he moved in front of her. "This is none of your concern."

The man's probing stare continually pushed past Rhonon, trying to get at Eve. He didn't try to hide what it was he wanted. Rhonon gripped his sword harder. It took all his will not to strike out and take the man's head off. It wasn't the presence of the two gladiators that prevented him, but the reality that beheading the territorial governor would bring on a swift and harsh sentence of death.

"All that takes place in my territory is my concern." He spoke low, with confidence. "You're well aware of that, Rhonon." He gazed at Rhonon with heavy eyes, sizing the man up. "Perhaps you've reconsidered my proposal?"

Rhonon's eyes snapped to the two gladiators, the brands on their arms, then back to the governor. "No."

"As you wish." The governor peered around Rhonon once more, then turned away. He spoke low to one of the two gladiators. "Bring her to my chambers. This brothel is no place for a lady."

18

Bring her to my chambers.

Something in those words sent a chill rushing through Eve's blood. Maybe she didn't really want to be here with Rhonon, but suddenly the idea of leaving his side and being alone with this other, supposedly more civilized man made her feel extremely vulnerable and...unsafe. There was an air of authority in the man that even Rhonon seemed hesitant to challenge, and that filled her with extreme unease, for Rhonon didn't strike her as a man who backed down to anyone.

One of the two gladiators who accompanied the man came around the far end of the long table and approached Eve. Instinctively, she gripped Rhonon's arm without truly realizing what she was doing. All of the sudden, he seemed the lesser of the two evils.

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The gladiator hesitated when Rhonan drilled him with a stony glare. No man seemed in a hurry to challenge Rhonan in a duel. For a brief, hopeful moment, Eve was sure the man would retreat. But to her disbelief and silent horror...it was Rhonan who stood down.

"What...?" Eve gasped when the gladiator took hold of her arm. Fear shot through her. Her frightened eyes grabbed for Rhonan's but his stare evaded hers. She wanted to pull away, struggle, scream at the gladiator to let her go. But she knew not to defy a man of authority. And the man taking her away must have considerable authority for Rhonan to stand idly by and allow it to happen.

Her pulse raced and her breath was shaky as the gladiator led her away from Rhonan and into the custody of the other man. Up close, he was just a few inches taller than her, his muscles lean but solid. His black hair brushed back away from his chiseled face that she should have found appealing. But his piercing, probing ice chipped eyes prevented even a sliver of attraction to needle its way in.

The man was gazing casually at Rhonan, as if he truly enjoyed his power over such a formidable opponent. Rhonan's eyes cut into the man as surely as his blade might slice his flesh. The muscles in Rhonan's face flexed, the tendons in his neck stood out prominently. His fist clenched his sword as his other hand flexed tightly at his side. He looked like a lion about to lunge on its prey.

A slow, triumphant, mocking smile slid across the man's lip like a vile reptile. He touched his hand to the small of Eve's back. She instinctively flinched but knew better than to pull away. Rhonan's eyes snapped to where the man's hand was resting against her body. This seemed to please her new captor even more. He knew she wasn't just another insignificant wench to be fucked and tossed away. Rhonan's real interest in her was of importance to this man. But why did it matter if the gladiator had a special affection for her? What should this man of obvious authority care?

The hand on her back pressed firmly and moved her forward. The man cast an absent glance at Rhonan as he led her away. "Perhaps you will reconsider my proposal."

Eve could feel Rhonan's eyes boring into her back as she was guided through the crowded hall, burning her flesh with the heat of his rage. As if she were linked to him mind, she felt his urge to lunge over the table and rip her away from this man. But he stood his ground as she was taken away, out of sight of him, to someplace where he couldn't protect her.

A steady wave of chills flowed through Eve's body as the man directed through a high ceiling, stone hallway. The two gladiators followed a few feet behind, neither speaking. She had seen the branded flesh on their arms and wondered what it meant. The design resembled a seal of some form. Eve remembered what Rhonan said about not all gladiators being free and having the freedom to choose whether or not to enter the arena. Were these two men his slaves? Forced to fight? They didn't seem to be here against their will, but then perhaps they were just well trained, like a dog who has been beaten into submission.

The man stopped at a thick wooden door and nodded once to the gladiators. They took their posts on either side of the door as Eve was led inside. The heavy door closed with a hollow boom and Eve wondered if it somehow represented a door being shut on the life she had known up to this point, and on the girl she clung to, still not yet quite a full woman. The hollow sensation forming inside her filled her with dread and horror at the reality that this man would be the one to introduce her to the passions of the flesh. And more frighteningly...the true, unbound lust of a man.

19

"Don't." Gabriel's strong hand gripped Rhonan's arm, stopping him from rushing after Eve.

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Rhonan whirled and the tip of his sword was touching Gabriel's throat before he registered his own movement. The sharp tip depressed Gabriel's skin, drawing the tiniest drop of blood. Rhonan's chest heaved and he withdrew his weapon quickly. Gabriel reached up slowly and wiped the drop of blood from his throat.

"I'm sorry, brother." Rhonan muttered and turned away.

Gabriel grabbed his arm again, unafraid. "Don't do it."

Sheathing his sword, Rhonan's eyes remained locked on the large doorway across the expansive hall. The same doorway Eve disappeared through just minutes ago.

"Nero is using her to bait you. This is what he wants."

Rhonan glared at his friend. "You think I don't know that? This isn't the first time he's used others against me. I am not so fucking foolish as to not see what he's doing."

Nodding, a glint of sympathy in Gabriel's eyes, he drew his hand away. "Is she worth it?"

Rhonan swallowed tightly. It felt like his throat was filled with rocks. Eve's face danced behind his eyes. The woman despised him outwardly, but what he saw in her eyes told him a much different story. From the instant he'd lifted her onto his horse, he had longed to be the man to bring her to full womanhood. She didn't have to tell him she was a virgin, a woman just had a way about her, a look, even a smell. That untouched, sweet scent of purity. It wasn't something he wished to violate...but to nourish, savor.

But now she was in Nero's hands. Hands that were rough, harsh, cruel. He would take what he wanted, rip it from her, and leave her in ruins. A lovely rose crushed beneath his heel.

Is she worth it?

Rhonan didn't even have to consider the answer.

Chapter 6

20

"Do you not know who I am?" The man asked inquisitively.

Eve ducked her head a bit. Would it anger him if she admitted she did not? But what else could she say? "No, M'Lord." She spoke soft, respectful. Though his initial speech and action depicted a genteel man, the woman in her trembled at the beast she sensed hiding beneath the surface.

He chuckled and approached her casually, taking her hand gently in his own. He kissed the back of her hand softly. "I am Nero, the territorial governor. And you are..."

Eve faltered then whispered unsteadily. "Eve."

"Eve." He murmured, seeming to taste the name. "The name of the mother of all man. Lovely."

Eve wanted to pull her hand from his, but forced herself to wait until he released her. Finally, he did so and moved away again, towards the window. Eve stared at his back. Nero. The governor. She'd never seen his face before, but knew him well. Nausea welled inside her, pinched her stomach severely. This couldn't be the man to take her virginity. Not him. Anyone but him.

Tears burned her eyes and she tried to blink them back. If she showed fear, weakness...would he react like the predator he was?

Nero faced her suddenly. His eyes narrowed a bit as he noticed her wet eyes. He smiled and approached her slowly. "You don't need to fear me. I mean you no harm." He brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek. She turned her face away a little, on reflex. She couldn't take his touch. She wanted to spit in his face, scratch out his eyes. But all she could do was stand there as he stroked her cheek.

"You're a very lovely woman, Eve." He murmured as he began to circle her. "So ripe." He moved up close behind her and leaned close, breathing deep, drawing in her scent. "You're a virgin." It wasn't a question. Men just seemed to know. He fingered the back of her dress, gently loosening the laces.

Eve shuddered. Fresh tears filled her eyes. This couldn't be happening. Just this morning, she'd been afraid of being in this very situation with Rhonan...and now she would give anything for it to be his hands on her, his strong body pressed up close behind her, him about to usher her into the final stages of womanhood.

Tears slid down her cheeks as Nero tugged open the back of her dress then caressed her bare skin with his fingers. She shuddered again and covered her mouth quick to stifle a sob.

"Come." He murmured against her hair. "It's well past time for you to become a woman."

He guided her to the large bed and laid her down. He shed his outer garment, giving her a clearer view of the engorged bulge in his crotch. He crawled onto the bed with her, and began to peel her dress off as one might peel a succulent fruit. When her breasts became exposed, he paused and cupped the firm, rounded mounds with his hands. Eve squeezed her eyes shut as hot tears drained down into her ears. There was no stopping him from doing as he pleased. She prayed for it to be over soon.

Eve of Passion

Nero's hot mouth covered one of her nipples and sucked at her tender flesh. Eve whimpered, longing to push him away. A deep groan rolled up his throat and his hands became more urgent, less gentle as he tugged at her dress, pulling it further down her body. He was panting as he worked it off and threw it aside then hovered over the top of her.

Eve's eyes were still clamped shut but she could feel his hot breath on her skin as his invasive mouth began to explore her body. He still wore his pants but had shed his shirt as he forced himself between her legs and ground his bulging crotch against her virgin core. His mouth and hands violated her body as he worked his hips against her.

"Eve." He groaned, his voice thick with lust. "You taste so good. So fresh and sweet." He kissed a hot path from her breasts down over her stomach and lower between her thighs. His strong hands pushed her legs open. He pressed his face close to her pussy and breathed in deep, another groan escaping him.

No. God, please...

Nero's fingertips slid over her pussy lips and spread her open. His breath was hot on her clit when a sudden, loud knock on the heavy door forced him to pause. A hiss of irritation released from deep inside him.

"Not now!" He roared.

Eve's chest heaved, her body shaking as his mouth hovered so close to her heated center. She didn't know who was interrupting them, but she prayed they wouldn't go away. Per her wish, there was more pounding on the door.

Nero swore loudly and shoved himself up and off the bed. He strode to the door, his rage visible in every movement. He ripped open the door. "If you wish to see tomorrow." He raged. "You'll do well to get away from my door."

Nero suddenly grew quiet. Eve heard low voices, but couldn't make out their words. She glanced at the door. Nero was speaking to one of the gladiators. He stepped back suddenly and closed the door. Eve turned her face away, closing her eyes again, waiting for him to resume. She flinched when she felt her dress fall across her body. She opened her eyes slowly.

Nero was standing beside the bed, looking down on her. A strong lust still burned in his eyes, but he seemed content to leave her be. "Get dressed." He said calmly. "You may return to the festivities."

Eve grabbed the dress and pulled it over her chest as she sat forward. Nero turned away and exited the room, leaving her alone to dress.

When Eve returned to the main hall, she paused in the doorway, searching for Rhonan. She couldn't see him anywhere. She gasped when a strong hand suddenly clamped onto her arm and half dragged her across the floor towards the outer exit. She looked up in shock at Rhonan's hard face, his jaw clenched and flexed in what she could only interpret as extreme rage.

He led her outside to where the carriage waited. Yanking open the door, he practically shoved her inside without a word to her, then closed the door hard. Through the window, she saw him step back and bark an order at the driver to take her home. The carriage jerked suddenly as the driver laid the whip to the horses hind quarters and the animals lunged forward.

Eve of Passion

Eve grabbed the window for support as she was thrown off balance, then settled back against the seat. Her pulse raced and her head was spinning. What the hell had just happened? Why would Rhonan be angry at her? She hadn't left with Nero of her own free will. He had to know she had no choice but to comply with Nero's wishes. And yet his actions were those of a man who had been betrayed by his woman.

Well, I'm not *his* woman, Eve was suddenly seething. How dare he blame her for something that wasn't her fault? That she had no control over?

Her face burned with her own fury. She had been right all along. The man was a brute. Well, perhaps now he would stay away and leave her in peace. In the end, she was getting what she'd wanted from the start.

The carriage rattled over the stone bridge. Eve's nerves were frayed. She needed out of here, outside in the open air. She leaned out the window. "Driver!" She called loudly. "Stop the carriage!"

The carriage immediately slowed then rolled to a halt. The driver jumped down and opened the door. "Is everything all right, M'Lady?"

Eve nodded. "Yes. But I can walk from here."

"Walk?" The driver frowned. "I was instructed to drive you to your home."

Suddenly annoyed with the man and not sure why, Eve crawled out of the carriage, pushing past the driver. "Well, perhaps the great and magnificent Rhonan is your master. But he is not mine." Eve fumed. "I will walk from here."

Without waiting for a response, she started down the road, leaving the driver to stare after her in shock.

21

The large hall pulsed with a loud humming noise. Rhonan had returned to his place at the table, but he was barely aware of anything or anyone around him. His fists rested on the table, clenched tightly. His heart thudded heavily in his chest. On the far side of the large hall, Nero sat with a serving wench in his lap, drinking and laughing loudly. His two gladiators had women of their own to fondle, and were becoming as raucous as Isaac had been.

A moment before Rhonan looked away, Nero caught his stare. A smirk played on his lips. Rhonan's head felt like it would explode. He ripped his eyes from the despicable man and glanced towards the large, outer exit - and frowned hard. The carriage driver stood in the wide opening, talking with another man.

Rhonan stood up so suddenly his chair shot backwards. He shoved his way through the crowd of bodies to the exit and grabbed the driver, whipping him around.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rhonan's chest heaved. "I told you to take the woman home."

A real fear darkened the driver's eyes. "Sir, the lady insisted on walking."

"Walking?" Rhonan raged. "You let her *walk*?"

"Sir." The driver hurriedly explained. "The lady was quite insistent. To prevent her, I would have had to physically restrain her."

Eve of Passion

"Then *that's* what you should have done." Rhonan hissed. "When I give you an order, I expect it to be carried out."

Rhonan spun away, leaving the driver in shock for the second time that night. He rushed outside and mounted his steed quickly, dug in his heels hard and yanked the animal around, sending it off down the stone street. The large horse's hooves clacked loud across the hard surface, echoing through the night. He raced up and over the stone bridge and away from town.

22

The thundering of hooves reached Eve's ears before she saw the large white steed appear out of the darkness behind her like a ghost from the netherworld. She gasped and stepped to the far side of the road as Rhonan came up on her in a rush, dragging back on the reins in a single forceful yank. The large horse dropped its butt low and came to a halt so suddenly it spit dirt and rocks with its massive hooves.

Eve barely saw the gladiator move before he was standing before her, towering over her like a mountain about to crash down. The same rage she'd seen in him earlier still burned in his eyes.

"What the hell are you doing?" He was clearly struggling to keep his anger under control. "Why did you get out of the carriage?"

Eve met his hard eyes straight on, refusing to cower. She'd had her fill of submission for one evening. "Because I wanted to walk." She stated bluntly.

"It's too far to walk at night." Rhonan said tightly.

"Why do you care if I walk?" Eve wondered. "I am not your concern."

Rhonan stared at her for a long moment in silence. Something flickered in his steely eyes, as if a battle were raging deep inside him.

Suddenly, Eve was trembling and she didn't know why. She wasn't cold. Or frightened. But every nerve in her body had surfaced and she couldn't stop it. "It wasn't my choice." She blurted out, startling herself. "I didn't choose to go with him. Why are you blaming me as if I had a choice?"

Rhonan continued to stare at her, his brow furrowed deep, his eyes like stone.

"If you somehow feel that I've betrayed you." She trembled. "Then leave me alone. Just leave me alone anyway. I did as I said I would, I accompanied you to the celebration. Now please...just leave me be."

Tears were burning behind her eyes and it disturbed her that she felt on the verge of breaking down. But she'd be damned if she let him see it. She turned away quickly, ready to flee his overwhelming presence, when he suddenly and without warning scooped her up in his arms. A sharp cry flew from her lips as she was hoisted up on the back of the large horse. She grasped the saddle, clinging with her legs, and stared down at Rhonan, wide-eyed.

"What...what are you doing?"

"You will ride him home." Rhonan's voice was determined and left no room for argument.

"I-I can't ride this horse." Eve insisted. "I'm not a good rider."

Eve of Passion

"He'll take care of you." Rhonan said. He rubbed his hand down the animal's thick neck. "Show him kindness and respect." Rhonan met her eyes, his voice low. "And he'll return the courtesying."

Eve was held by his penetrating eyes for a long moment as she sensed an underlying meaning to his words. When he suddenly released her from his stare, she again clutched at the saddle.

"Please...let me down." She said quietly, unsteadily. "Just let me walk."

Rhonan tucked the reins into her hands. "He's a large animal, but he will listen to you. Gentle commands will get him to obey much quicker than harsh orders."

Eve stared at Rhonan's face as he spoke, avoiding her eyes. His words felt heavy, weighted down by indirect messages, as if he were trying to tell her something without saying it directly.

When he stepped back from the horse, he finally met her stare. "I'll send someone for him in the morning." Again, a battle raged behind his eyes. "You won't be seeing me again. As per your wishes."

With that, he raised his hand in a quick movement and smacked the horse on the rear. Eve gasped, released a sharp cry, and clung to the animal as it surged forward like an arrow shot from a bow.

23

The massive steed bolted away, disappearing into the night like an apparition fading from one world to another. Rhonan stood motionless, watching as Eve vanished in the darkness. It had taken every bit of his will not to swing up on the horse behind her, take her to her home and spend the remainder of the night in her warm arms, kissing and tasting every inch of her young, fresh body until they couldn't take it anymore and became one with each other.

By the strength of force in his crotch just now, he knew he could spend the entire night ravishing her without the need for rest. Perhaps when he'd lifted her up in front of him when they'd first met, that was how he'd envisioned this night ending. Her in his arms, in his bed...and it being her wish, her desire to be there.

But that fantasy was dead. Though she clearly harbored sexual desires for him, her heart and mind despised him. And perhaps it was truly better this way. For though Nero had released her before fully violating her, he retained a lust for her. The further she was from Nero, the safer she would remain. And to be with Rhonan now...would put Eve in Nero's direct path.

It was better to let her go. Better that she didn't know all he'd sacrificed to protect her honor, her virtue.

Rhonan turned back towards town. He rubbed his hand up over his arm, and winced slightly. He shoved up his sleeve and stared at the fresh, swollen, raw burn and the symbol branded into his flesh.

Nero's seal of ownership.

Chapter 7

24

Too frightened to do anything but cling to the saddle, Eve hunched over and held on for dear life as the giant horse bolted through the darkness, kicking up plumes of dust behind him. She started to lose her balance and pulled back on the reins by pure accident, sitting back a fraction in the seat of the saddle. The horse instantly slowed to a trot then an urgent walk.

Eve was afraid to move, frightened she might encourage the animal to take off again. But the horse slowed from a fast walk to steady pace. Eve relaxed a bit and adjusted the reins in her hands. It wasn't as if she'd never been on a horse, it had just been a good many years. She tested the reins and tugged back gently. The horse slowed to a crawl, barely moving forward. Tentatively, afraid to urge him too much, she squeezed her legs against his sides with a very slight pressure. The horse's pace quickened just a little, putting him back into a steady walk.

"This isn't so hard." Eve murmured. Her first time on this horse had been a rough, heart stopping ride as Rhonan had galloped them down the stone street. But this was nice. Much more comfortable, and considerably less frightening. Rhonan had been right about the horse obeying gentle commands. It seemed sensitive to the slightest touch.

Eve chanced a light pat on the horse's thick neck. "You're not so big and bad, are you?"

The horse blew air through its nose and bobbed its head. Eve smiled and laughed softly. She leaned forward in the saddle to rub her hand up and down its neck when the horse quickened its pace to a trot. "No. Whoa." Eve sat back again and tugged on the reins. The horse resumed its walk.

The night air was warm and a soft breeze pulled gently at her hair. It was no longer neatly pinned up, having come undone when Nero put her on the bed.

Eve cringed at the memory. Nausea gripped her stomach. He had come so close to...

She forced the thought away. It was over, he had released her. Why? She didn't know, and she didn't care. She just prayed he was never that close to her again.

The horse's heavy hooves thumped against the dirt road. He seemed to know where he was going, although he couldn't possibly. She looked around through the darkness but could see very little. A partial moon barely cast enough light for her to even see the road in front of her. She thought about Rhonan walking back to town on foot. It had surprised and startled her when he'd lifted her up on the horse and told her to take him.

You won't be seeing me again. As per your wishes.

Conflicting emotions whirled and rumbled inside her like a storm brewing. She saw Rhonan's enraged face as he'd dragged her to the carriage, but at the same time she could still feel his hand clamped firmly on her thigh. The conflicting memories clashed and ignited a heat deep between her thighs. She shifted uneasily in the saddle, disturbed by the effect.

She had told him to leave her alone. It was what she wanted. She'd never wanted to have anything to do with the man.

Eve of Passion

So why was there a hollow ball forming in the center of her chest?

25

She put the horse up in the old stall across the narrow isle from Dina, the milk cow. Eve spread fresh straw on the stall floor, dumped in a partial flake of hay and removed the horse's tack.

"Sorry. Don't have anything fancy to feed you." She rubbed her hands over the animal's side then paused when she felt dampness on her fingertips. She frowned and looked closer. The lantern hung on the door of the stall and provided only minimal light but it was clear that the skin on the horse's side was partially lacerated and bleeding a little. She recalled how hard Rhonan had been riding the horse when he'd come upon her on the road.

"Your master is a brute." She muttered tightly to the animal. She left the stall and returned with a small container of salve and attended to the horse's minor wounds.

She stepped out of the stall, closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, watching the animal munch on the hay. Fatigue swarmed over her in a sudden wave and she pushed away from the stall. "Have a good night, boy."

The horse raised its head and nickered when she walked away but she was too tired to return and visit with him anymore.

When she entered the house, she half expected Marcus to be waiting up, sitting at the table, ready to grill her on the details of her evening. But the house was silent. A single oil lamp glowed in the center of the table and a low, warm fire burned in the stove. Eve was grateful for the warmth of the house. Though the evening air was relatively warm outside, she'd nonetheless developed a chill on the ride home. Although she wondered if the chill was more of a result from the events of the evening rather than the night air.

Cupping her hand around the chimney of the lamp, she blew out the flame. Darkness dropped like a heavy blanket but Eve knew this house like the back of her hand. She started for her room then changed direction and went to Marcus' door. She knocked light and opened the door a few inches.

"Marcus?" She whispered. "Are you awake?"

No answer. She peered inside. A very faint moonlight silhouetted the figure beneath the blankets. He hadn't waited up for her, and that in itself told her he was still upset with her. She considered waking him and talking it through, but tonight she just didn't have the strength or will for any argument that might arise. She closed the door softly and moved on to her own bedroom.

She was only partially undressed when the shakes hit her, weakening her knees. She sank down on the edge of the bed and hugged herself tightly. A sudden, unexpected sob erupted from her throat, bringing with it a flow of tears. A strange, surreal sensation rushed over her and for a brief moment, she was back on Nero's bed, his hands and mouth violating her body, his raw hunger pressing hard between her legs. Her chest tightened and she tried to breathe but the air wouldn't come as the weight of his body crushed her beneath him.

"No..." She gasped hard and snapped back to reality so suddenly her head spun. She sucked in quick breaths, filling her lungs, tears streaming down her face. Her skin felt filthy and infected, like vile insects were crawling all over her. A strangled sob rose in her throat and she stumbled out of the bedroom and back to the kitchen.

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Lighting the lamp with shaking hands, she quickly filled a kettle with water and began heating it on the stove. She stuffed more logs into the stove until it was roaring hot. When the water began to steam, she took it to her room and filled the wash basin, stripped naked and began scrubbing her body erratically with the hot water. Hard sobs fell from her lips as she raked her skin with the wash cloth, turning it red and blotchy. The water scalded her skin but she ignored it and continued to attempt to scrape away the memory of Nero's touch.

When she finally crawled into bed, her skin was stinging and the blankets rubbing against the sensitive surface made it difficult for her to rest comfortably. After many false attempts, she finally fell into a shallow, troubled sleep plagued by disturbing dreams made up of distant, frightening memories.

* * * *

The little girl crawled through the broken section of wood planks and slipped beneath the massive stadium overhead. Her dress snagged on the jagged end of a board and she yanked on it, ripping the fabric but not caring. She worked her way around, over and under the thick beams supporting the stadium seats. The stomping of thousands of feet, shouting voices, thundered all around her but she ignored it as she kept moving forward, tears streaking her dusty face.

She reached the other side and found the small hole her brother had showed her. Kneeling on the dirt, tiny rocks digging into her knees and shins, she pressed her eye close to the hole and began to tremble.

The arena was alive with battle. The gladiator looked like a monster from the stories her brother told her, taller than any man she'd ever seen, thick and muscular. His armor clanked as he moved with surprising agility and grace, his massive sword gleaming as he swung it around, guiding it skillfully to his foe.

The girl's eyes jumped to the man battling the gladiator. He was stout, but not nearly as large as the gladiator or as skillful with a sword. The man stumbled back, barely avoiding the fatal blow of the gladiator's sword. Before he could catch his footing, the gladiator was bearing down on him again, raising his sword and bringing it around in a powerful arc.

A whimper trembled on the girl's lips. Her heart jumped to her throat and up into her head, beating wildly like a humming bird trapped inside her skull.

As the gladiator brought the sword around, he shifted slightly and, rather than slice the man open, hit him in the face with his fist gripping the handle of the sword. The man catapulted backwards, hitting the ground hard, lay unmoving, stunned by the blow. The gladiator approached him and stomped a heavy foot on the man's chest, pinning him to the ground. He pointed his sword down at the fallen man and touched the tip of his blade to his throat.

"No..." The little girl choked softly.

The gladiator raised his free hand to the crowd. The people roared and the little girl clamped her hands over her ears as the thundering overhead intensified. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks.

The gladiator turned slowly and looked up to a designated area in the stadium and waited. The girl squinted and looked past the warrior. She could barely see the man up in the stadium but she saw his hand as he held his thumb up then suddenly stabbed it downward.

"NO!" The girl screamed and beat at the wooden planks separating her from the arena.

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The gladiator look down at the fallen man. A grin twisted the warrior's face as he drove the sword through the man's throat.

Tear flooded the girl's eyes. She clawed the wooden planks, her nails tearing and bleeding. "Daddy!"

* * * *

"Daddy!" Eve bolted forward in bed, gasping, her chest and head pounding. Tears wet her face and streamed from her eyes as she sucked in deep lungfuls of air, hunched over forward. Hard sobs choked her.

An arm went around her suddenly and Eve jumped, crying out softly.

"Easy, sis." Marcus was on the bed beside her, pulling her against him. "It's just me."

A flurry of sobs broke loose and Eve sagged against him, clinging to him. Marcus stroked her hair and held her tight until her sobs subsided a bit, then he sat her up straighter and looked in her face.

"What is it, Eve? What's wrong?"

"The dream." Eve choked out. "I was dreaming about..."

"Father." Marcus nodded slowly. "I thought those dreams stopped."

Eve hugged herself tightly and stared distantly down at the blankets. "Nero was there." She whispered thickly.

Marcus stiffened beside her. "He was where?"

"At the celebration."

Drawing her closer, Marcus pressed his lips to her hair. "I'm so sorry. If I had known he would be there..." He swallowed tightly. "I would have never pushed you to go."

"It isn't your fault." Eve whispered numbly, the night's event flashing through her mind.

Marcus drew back and looked at her again, his face tense. "Did something happen?"

Eve gazed back at him. He didn't need to know the details. He would just blame himself. "No." She said softly, then looked away quickly before he saw she was lying. He always seemed to know. "Just seeing him...I guess it was enough to make the dreams come back."

"And Rhonan?"

This time it was Eve who stiffened. "What about him?"

"How was your evening with him?"

Eve's mind reeled. She closed her eyes and tried to push away every thought of Rhonan. "Uneventful." She said quietly, thickly.

By the weight of Marcus' eyes, Eve sensed he was picking up on the lie. "I'm sorry." He spoke low, sincere. "I shouldn't have pressed you to go with him. I knew how you felt about gladiators and you have every right to

Eve of Passion

feel as you do. I just thought maybe...Rhonan would prove to you they're not all brute beasts."

Scooting down in bed, Eve pulled the covers up over her shoulder and turned her back to Marcus. "I think they are all the same." She whispered, startled by the sudden fresh tears stinging her eyes. "Maybe not on the surface...but deep down."

Marcus squeezed her shoulder with affection. "Maybe one day you'll have cause to believe otherwise, sis."

Eve bit her lower lip and struggled to stifle her sobs as Marcus left the bed and went to the door, slipping quietly out of the room. As soon as he was gone, Eve buried her face in the blankets and cried openly, disturbed and confused by the tears, knowing they weren't all shed for a father she lost so long ago.

26

Her soft hands were on his body, caressing and exploring, taking their time, being pleasingly thorough. The her warm lips touched him and he flinched, a low groan rumbling deep in his chest. She dropped kisses on his skin like droplets of honey, her soft lips gently pressing to his naval, the warm, wet tip of her tongue circling the small hole. Her full, firm breasts hung loosely around his hard cock and he raised his hips just a bit, sliding it through the heated tunnel they created.

As her probing lips moved lower, his breath quickened. It was just a dream, he knew this, but it felt so real he couldn't resist it. He could live in this dream forever, when outside it, cold hard reality waited like a cruel master to strike him in the face and remind him his life was not his own, and Eve...was just a sweet dream that wouldn't come true.

Another groan choked up his throat on the tail of a sob as her silky wet mouth covered the head of his cock and sucked firmly. Her soft hands wrapped around the base of his throbbing dick as her mouth lowered onto his shaft an inch at a time, taking him in easily and eagerly.

Rhonan gripped the bedsheets in tight fistfuls, a sharp gasp escaping him. His hips moved with a will of their own, stroking his cock in and out of her sweet, hot mouth. "Eve..." He groaned out in a tight, longing whisper.

She moaned softly around his cock, the vibration spiraling down to his balls and causing them to ached fiercely. They would have to be emptied before they could fill up anymore, and Eve's mouth was working well towards emptying them.

Rhonan clenched his jaw as a growl squeezed out. Eve sucked his cock up and down, in perfect rhythm to his own stroking, taking his plump cockhead into her tight throat, squeezing him with her whole mouth as she firmly tugged and pulled against his steel hard flesh.

His chest heaving faster and harder, Rhonan clutched the sheets tighter and thrust his cock into her mouth. His balls tightened and began to tingle as his cock swelled in her mouth.

"Fuck!" He gasped out hard. He reached down and grabbed her head as he fucked her mouth, struggling to maintain control and not make it uncomfortable for her - remembering too clearly the scene with Isaac and his wench. But she took his thrusting cock with ease, seeming to enjoy it more as he drew closer and closer to release.

"EVE!" He shouted out suddenly as his cock burst and he ejaculated down her throat.

Eve of Passion

Rhonan's eyes snapped open, panting hard, his chest rising and falling in rapid succession. A sheen of sweat covered his body. He rubbed a shaky hand over his face - then froze. He was awake but he could still feel Eve down between his legs, her warm mouth still sucking his cock. He looked down quickly to find a pair of green eyes gazing up at him from beneath a head of fiery red hair. The woman's mouth gripped his cock and moved up and down his shaft.

"What?!" Rhonan jerked back, shoving her off him. "What the fuck are you doing? Who are you?"

The woman sat up and rested back on her heels. She was naked and very pretty with a lovely body. Rhonan's primal instinct tried to kick in as his already ignited body responded to the sight of her and what she had been doing to him. But images of the dream flashed behind his eyes. His body had responded so completely in the dream because, in the dream, it had been Eve doing these things to him.

"Lord Nero sent me." Her voice was low, soft. Pleasing. "To welcome you."

Rhonan scooted up in bed and covered his lower half with the blanket. He swallowed thickly, his body still craving the ecstasy of his dream. He could take the woman, have his way with her, and who would care? Eve didn't want him. Why shouldn't he satisfy his desires?

As if reading his thoughts, the woman leaned forward onto her hands and knees and crawled towards him. His eyes raked over her curving body, swaying tits. How quickly he could be behind her, gripping her hips, driving his cock into her hot, willing pussy.

Desperation mingled with rage. Why did such a notion fill him with guilt? Make him feel as if he would be betraying Eve? She despised him, had told him to leave her be. Why the hell should it matter who he fucked? His body felt as if it had been set on fire and the willingness in the woman before him only seemed to ignite him more. Not because she was the object of his desire, but because she displayed the eagerness and wanting he longed to see in Eve. Why not let her pleasure him as Eve never would?

"I am your gift." The woman cooed as she slid her hands up Rhonan's legs. His cock jumped and swelled beneath the blanket. He wanted to both pull her to him and thrust her away, the conflicting emotions and desires and needs wrapping around his mind and body like thorny vines, torturing him. "A special gift from your new master."

The woman's words slapped him hard across the face. Rage overrode all other emotions and he grabbed her arms, shoving her away from him, knocking her back on the bed.

"Get out." He growled deeply, his eyes blazing with fury. "Get the fuck out of my room. I don't want anything from Nero. *Anything.*"

Fear darkened the woman's eyes as she grabbed up her clothes and hurried from the room.

Your new master.

Rhonan leaned back and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes, released a strangled cry of rage and frustration and left the bed. He stood before a large mirror, his eyes stony as he stared at the seal burned into his arm. He'd sacrificed his freedom for a woman who saw him as little more than a brute beast. Had he thought his sacrifice would mean something to her, prove to her that he wasn't a selfish bastard.

"Just when did you become such a fool?" He muttered to his reflection.

Eve of Passion

But in all fairness, he realized, she knew nothing of his sacrifice. She didn't know that he had traded his freedom, his very life, in exchange for Nero turning her loose with her virginity intact - and his solemn word that he would never touch her again.

Chapter 8

27

Eve's head felt thick and heavy as she made her way to the kitchen. Dawn had barely begun to push back the night and lamp light was still necessary. Marcus had already been up and out doing chores. His coat and boots were gone.

The kitchen was warm, a strong fire burning in the cook stove. Eve set about to fix Marcus some breakfast so when he came back in, he would have a warm meal waiting for him. She often wondered why he wasn't married by now. He was certainly popular enough with the young women in town. She had a nagging notion that he didn't seek a wife because of her. He didn't want to leave her alone. Ever since the loss of their parents, he had been extremely protective of her. He would never just go away and leave her top fend for herself, although she could if she had to.

She placed some potatoes in a bowl, grabbed a small knife and began peeling them at the table. She had a deep set fear of losing Marcus to the life he deserved, the wife he deserved. And she felt guilty for that. She knew she was extremely particular when it came to men, and often turned away perfectly acceptable suitors. If she were married and settled, Marcus would be free to make a life of his own. When the next viable candidate came along...perhaps she should just accept him and be done with it.

Sudden, unbidden images of Rhonan rose behind her eyes. Marcus had said she needed a man like Rhonan. But she didn't believe that was case. She knew Marcus wanted her to be with a man who could protect her and fight for her, and perhaps that was why he opted for someone like Rhonan. But though Rhonan might make an amazing lover, the man was hardly husband material. After a few nights with her, he would be gone, seeking other fresh young women to pleasure him.

Eve's chest tightened at the thought. Something for which she immediately berated herself. Why should she care if he wanted other women? She didn't even want him, and she certainly didn't love him.

"Why is Rhonan's horse in the barn?" Marcus entered the house suddenly, banging open the door.

Eve gasped sharply and nearly jumped out of her chair. She met her brother's puzzled eyes. "Uh...I...rode him home last night."

Marcus cocked his head as his eyes narrowed slightly. "You rode Rhonan's horse home? You?"

Eve shrugged and lowered her eyes to the potatoes in the bowl. "It's...a long story. He's going to send someone to get the horse."

Taking a seat at the table directly across from Eve, Marcus just stared at her in silence.

Eve shifted uncomfortably. "What?"

"When I asked you about your evening with Rhonan...I'm guessing you left out a lot."

Eve didn't answer, and continued to peel the potatoes.

"What's going on, Eve?" Marcus asked low. "Did you and Rhonan..."

Eve of Passion

Her head snapping up, Eve stared at him in shock. "No!" She shot back too quickly.

Marcus chuckled and leaned back a bit. "Are you sure about that?"

Eve's jaw dropped. "I think I would know if I..." She cut herself off and shook her head. "I do not desire the man."

"Yeah." Marcus smirked and stood up. "Regardless of what you think of the man, his horse needs tending to. Why don't you take him out some oats?"

"I'm fixing breakfast." Eve pointed out.

"Breakfast can wait." Marcus said. "I have some things I have to get finished before breakfast anyway."

Eve placed the knife in the bowl and pushed the bowl back. "Fine. I'll tend to the horse."

Heading for the door, Marcus nodded and grinned then slipped outside.

28

The sky was lightening a bit outside, but inside the barn, the shadows of night still held on. The lantern lit Eve's way through the lingering darkness. She cradled a bowl of oats and cut up apples in the crook of her arm. She had dribbled in a bit of molasses and mixed it with the oats and apple pieces for an added treat. Strange, she thought, how less than two days ago the large horse had terrified her as it catapulted down the stone street with her. And now, she felt the urge to pamper and spoil the animal.

Something she would never say to Marcus. He would immediately transfer her change in emotions towards the horse, to Rhonan. Which was ridiculous. Her feelings towards that man had not changed. Especially after the way he had treated his horse, showing no regard for the animal's comfort.

Her thoughts were silenced as she turned the corner and noticed a glow emanating from the horse's stall. She frowned. Marcus wouldn't have been so foolish as to leave a lantern lit and unattended in the barn.

Thinking Marcus may have returned to the barn, she started to call out to him when a deep, strong, masculine voice reached her. It was low, with a sliver of remorse in it. Eve crept up to the stall slowly, quietly, extinguishing her own lantern. She peered around the door of the stall and felt her heart shudder in her chest, nearly stop, then speed up so quickly it stole her breath.

Rhonan stood beside the horse, running his hand carefully over the animal's side where she had applied the salve. He reached up and stroked the horse's muscular neck. "Forgive me, my friend." He murmured with clear remorse.

The horse nickered and brought its head up suddenly, pricking its ears forward, looking straight at Eve. Rhonan's head snapped around, his troubled eyes grabbing hers and holding on. A sensation not unlike a bolt of lightning shot through her, making her flinch then tremble. When he released her eyes and returned his attention to the horse, she opened the stall and stepped inside.

"You should...put more salve on that." She reached into her pocket and withdrew a small contained then tentatively handed it to him. "It's a homemade remedy. It works well on animals." She shrugged and glanced away. "And people."

Eve of Passion

Rhonan's gaze was heavy as he looked at her and nodded, opened the container and smeared a dab of the salve on the small wound then moved to the other side and doctored that one as well. Eve remained silent as she held the bowl and let the horse eat from it. She could feel Rhonan watching her but didn't trust another look in his eyes. She didn't understand the power of that first glance and was afraid to explore it deeper.

"Thank you." He said suddenly. "For looking after him. Tending to his...needs."

Eve cleared her throat anxiously and simply nodded, her eyes on the horse's face as it dipped its head into the bowl and grabbed a mouthful of oats and apples.

"I didn't mean to...do this." Rhonan spoke low, tight.

Eve chanced a quick glance at him. To her relief, he was looking at the horse's side. But he turned suddenly and caught her stare before she could escape him.

"Do you think he forgives me for this?" His penetrating gaze pulled at her with force.

Eve swallowed thickly and tore her eyes from his. "I'm...I'm sure he does." She whispered unevenly.

She felt Rhonan standing closer before she realized he had moved. His hand rested on the horse's pull as he stared down at her, a storm of emotions in his dark eyes. "Do *you* forgive me?"

Eve shifted nervously and gripped the bowl more tightly in her arms. She didn't know how to answer, wasn't entirely certain what he was asking. Suddenly, his fingers were on her face, tilting her chin up to him. Her first thought was that he was going to kiss her and her pulse quickened immensely. But he simply looked at her.

"Do you forgive me?" He asked again, quietly. "For the way I acted with you?"

Pulling her chin away from his touch, Eve trembled. "I-I suppose."

Rhonan stepped back and shook his head slowly. "No. You don't." He reached for his saddle and began tacking up the horse. A sudden tension gripped him. His muscular arms flexed as he cinched up the saddle, his face hard as stone.

Confusion swarmed over Eve. What had just happened? She stared at his stony face.

"Why did you come here today?" She asked low. "You said you were going to send someone for your horse."

Rhonan reefered up on the cinch strap and tied it securely. He tested the saddle to make sure it was tight. When he looked at her, Eve took a step back from the fierceness in his eyes.

"I apologize for the intrusion, *My Lady*." He bit back. "But this time, I assure you, I won't come back."

Eve frowned, both puzzled and somewhat annoyed by his sudden change in attitude. What had she done this time? When he started shove past her and lead the horse from the stall, she grabbed his arm without thinking.

"Rhonan, wait." She insisted tersely. "Why are you-"

Eve was suddenly pinned against the stall, Rhonan's hot, hungry mouth crushing hers. His strong body held her in place as his probing tongue explored the inside of her mouth. When her initial shock subsided, she felt the heat and passion in the man pulling her in, drowning her.

Eve of Passion

Her hands touched his chest tentatively then slowly clutched his shirt as a soft moan rose in her throat.

Rhonan's fierce kiss eased a little as he sucked and tugged at her full lips, an almost anguished groan swelling inside him. An unyielding hardness pressed against her from between his legs. His mouth moved from her lips, along her jaw and down her neck. Her head spun wildly as he bit and sucked at her tender flesh. She moaned again, more deeply. She could feel the wetness forming between her thighs and wondered if he could smell her intense heat.

She felt Rhonan drawing her down onto the straw but she had lost the will to resist the man. Her dream came back full force, igniting her body and consuming her with a need unlike anything she had ever felt before.

29

What was he doing?

He shuddered as the moans rose in her throat beneath his lips. Her body was alive underneath him and arching to him. He had grabbed her and kissed her before he even knew what he was doing. And once his lips touched hers and his tongue entered her sweet, warm mouth, he knew there was no going back, no stopping.

His hands moved with a will of their own, tugging at her dress, peeling it off her body, exposing her soft, supple breasts, her silky skin. Her firm, plump nipple was in his mouth, his hands cupping her beautiful breasts. His cock throbbed and his balls ached, and the only thing on his mind was getting inside her hot, tight body. He knew he was going too fast, his hands and body too urgent and demanding, but his intense hunger for the woman was pushing him over the edge and he didn't know how to pull himself back.

Eve's hands were tugging at his shirt and he ripped it off over his head, then hurriedly worked her dress off the rest of her delicious body. He flattened his hands on her thighs and opened her legs, burying her face in her hot, wet core. A trembling groan shuddered up his throat as he tasted her sweetness, licked through her silky center. Eve gasped and clutched his head in her hands, lifting her hips to his hungry mouth.

"Yes..." She trembled.

He spread her open with his fingertips and sucked at her firm, protruding nub until she was crying out sharply and releasing a flood of hot, sweet juices. He lapped up her nectar, his cock so hard it felt on the verge of bursting.

"Rhonan..." Eve was shaking and he could hear the tears in her voice. Her hands trembled as she pulled at him, struggling desperately to draw him up over her aching body.

He shed his pants in one swift movement, his cockhead leaking and throbbing. He lowered himself over the top of her - when suddenly her hands were pushing him away, resisting his advance. His breath exploded out of him as his mind began to spin. Eve's hand clutched his arm, her palm pressed against the brand in his flesh. Her eyes were wide as she stared at Nero's seal.

"No..." She cried unsteadily as she shoved at him. "Get...get off me. Get off me!"

Rhonan hesitated, his body momentarily unable to retreat.

"Get Off!" She screamed suddenly, tears streaming from her eyes.

Rhonan forced himself to draw back. His whole body ached so bad he wanted to scream and punch the wall.

Eve of Passion

Eve grabbed at her dress and covered herself, scooting up against the stall. "You're...you're one of *Nero's* men?" Eve choked out, mortified. "You lied to me...you said you were free...but you're not. You vowed your life to *him*? To *fight* for him?"

"Eve, you don't understand." Rhonan reached for her but she pulled away.

"Go." She trembled, her face twisted with anger and despair. "Get out of here. And don't come back."

A pressure swelled in Rhonan's chest like a ball slowly inflating. His head throbbed violently as he stood and dressed. What the fuck had he been thinking? How had he expected her to react?

Rhonon grabbed the horse's reins and left the barn without a backwards glance.

Chapter 9

30

Eve huddled in the corner of the stall, her dress hugged close. She buried her face in the garment as sobs racked her trembling body. Nothing made sense to her anymore. Nero owned Rhonan? She couldn't fathom such an idea, and yet she had seen the seal in his arm, felt it beneath her hand. How could Rhonan choose to fight for such a man?

Using the edge of the stall for support, Eve slowly stood to her feet. Her legs felt weak. Her whole body seemed to lack strength. She was still reeling from Rhonan's touch, everything changing so suddenly she didn't have time to adjust. The intense desire she had felt for him was still swirling through her, mingling with the horror of discovering Nero's seal.

Her hands shook as she pulled on her dress. Once again, she'd come so close to losing her virginity. Yet now, she felt a deep, heavy dread settling in the pit of her stomach. This time, she had wanted it to happen, had been ready. But even so, she couldn't be certain what she'd felt was real. In herself or in Rhonan. The lust of the flesh was a powerful thing and it often fooled one into believing it was so much more than it was.

Eve hugged herself tightly and hurried back to the house, thankful Marcus was not there to question her disheveled appearance and tear streaked face.

31

"I see the horse is gone."

Eve ignored Marcus' statement as she dished him a plate of potatoes and eggs and set it before him. He'd stayed away long enough for her to compose herself, but her encounter with Rhonan was still too fresh in her mind and her emotions were simmering on the surface ready to bubble over.

"Are you angry at me for not telling you he was in the barn?" Marcus asked as he took the plate.

Eve released a low sigh and turned away. "No." She said quietly, not willing to chance anymore of an answer. Her throat was tight and all she really wanted to do was shut herself in her room and cry herself to sleep. Annoyance welled up in her. She despised the fact that she was getting so upset over a man who she had never wanted in her life in the first place. What did she care if Rhonan had sold his soul to Nero? It merely confirmed that her first impression of the man was right.

"Eve?"

Eve flinched. "Huh?"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Eve whispered.

Marcus nodded slowly as he took a bite of potatoes. "Uh huh."

"What?" Eve asked stiffly.

Eve of Passion

"Well." Marcus said. "Usually when you say 'I'm fine'...it means just the opposite. So what's wrong? Is it Rhonan?"

Eve moved the pan of potatoes to the back of the stove off the heat. "I said I was fine." She walked towards the kitchen doorway.

"You're not eating?" Marcus asked.

"I'm not hungry." Eve left the kitchen and went to her room, closing the door behind her. She went to the window and stared out at the long winding dirt road that led away from their home. The road Rhonan had rode down so recently. She would never see him coming back up that road again, and she knew that should give her some level of relief. A mutual sexual desire for one another did not mean they were in love. Could a man like Rhonan even fall in love? And if he had kept coming around, would she have fallen in love with him? Whether she wanted to admit it or not, it was a real possibility. So better he go away now before he truly ripped her heart out. For that is exactly what he would have done...had she asked him to stay, rather than sending him away with orders never to return.

32

A thick fur was draped over the large bed. Nero sat in the center, propped against multiple silk pillows, wearing a loose garment. The servant girl with fiery red hair and green eyes was kneeling between his thighs, nude. Her hands stroked his hard, thick cock. She leaned down and took the head of his prick in her mouth and slowly sucked him in deeper and deeper.

Rhonon stood back from the bed, his arms hung tensely at his sides. He tried to avert his eyes but the sexual hunger raging inside him wouldn't allow him to look elsewhere. The woman's nicely rounded ass jutted up in the air and swayed invitingly as her mouth moved up and down Nero's swollen cock. Her full breasts rested against the soft fur beneath her, and the curve of her body flowed like a gentle river.

A tightness squeezed Rhonan's throat as a severe ache settled in his crotch. Even now, he could still taste Eve's sweet nectar on his tongue, feel the firmness of her nipples in his mouth. His fingers tingled with the feel of her soft body beneath his touch. And the image of her laying before him, naked and aching for him to enter her virgin body and usher her into full womanhood...

Rhonon swallowed thickly, forcing down the groan swelling at the base of his throat.

"You should relax and accept your place." Nero said, then indicated the woman pleasuring him. "And partake of all the delicacies your new station in life offers you."

Rhonon's eyes shifted from the woman to Nero. He stared hard at the man, once again resisting the urge to behead him. A deep hatred emanated from his eyes, he could feel it like heat pouring out of him.

Nero smiled. "You despise me." He spoke low. "Why is that? I left your virgin undefiled."

Rage simmered in Rhonan's stare. His hands flexed hard at his sides.

Nero groaned suddenly, shifted, and lightly gripped a handful of the woman's hair and began slowly thrusting his cock into her mouth. "Suck harder." He told her with a low, stern voice. "Rub your pussy." The woman's cheeks depressed as her mouth pulled at his dick. One hand slid beneath her as she began to rub her clit with two fingers. Nero groaned again then shifted his attention back to the gladiator.

Eve of Passion

"It's good that you hate me." Nero told Rhonan. "Good that you can't have your woman. It will make you a more efficient fighter. I need a champion...not a fool weakened by the wiles of a woman." His gaze slid down to the woman sucking him off. "If you need to fuck, you have plenty of wenches to fulfill your desires. But a man swooning over a woman...is of no use to me." His eyes hardened as they bored into Rhonan. "Stay away from Eve. You have no business with her anymore. That is my decree."

Rhonan glared at him but refused to respond. Nero was baiting him, trying to break Rhonan and prove he was truly his master. Rhonan might die in the man's service, but Nero would never be his master. And staying away from Eve would not be a problem. The moment she discovered Nero's seal branded into his flesh, he had lost her.

The woman on the bed whimpered around Nero's thick cock. Her hips moved in rhythm with her fingertips. Rhonan watched her pleasure herself, her juices gleaming as her orgasm swelled. His own cock throbbed and ached as images of Eve flashed behind his eyes, her perfect pussy spread open before him, the taste of her heated passion as he drew her to climax, her tight entryway untouched by man, beckoning to him to be the first to enter her young virgin body.

A fierce heat crawled up Rhonan's neck, through his head and prickled his scalp. The red haired woman squealed as her orgasm burst, her fingers rubbing fast and urgent across her protruding nub, her hips swaying up and down as she reached deeper and began to thrust her fingers into her pulsating pussy. Nero held her mouth on his cock as a sudden tension gripped him. He fucked her with more urgency, his breath turning ragged. Rhonan longed to turn away, not watch, not hear, but he was transfixed on the scene, his whole body pulsing and aching. His balls were hard as stones and sucked up against his body as a pulse began to run through his cock.

The woman's head was gripped in both of Nero's hands as he thrust his cock into her mouth. Her fingers continued to stab into her wet pussy. Nero's jaw clenched and his body arched as he suddenly released a loud roar, his cock exploding, squirting his hot fluids down the woman's throat.

Sticky wetness drizzled from the tip of Rhonan's cock. Cum was trying to rise from his balls. His eyes burned as he watched the woman finger fuck herself as she sucked up and down Nero's cock.

Nero shuddered then released a heavy sigh. He looked at Rhonan and smiled.

"Take her." Nero said low as he stroked the woman's hair. "Do with her as you please. No need to suffer. She exists to be fucked. That is *her* station in life. Stick your cock in one of her tight hot holes and relieve yourself."

Rhonan swallowed tightly. Hunger and lust raged inside him as the woman's delicate fingers slid in and out of her pussy, the tight opening squeezing and sucking, glistening and gleaming as her sweet nectar seeped from her hot body. His vision blurred slightly as a fog seemed to flow over his mind. His body ached and burned so severely that all he could think about was easing the pain. His hands squeezed into tight fists until the veins swelled up along his forearms. He could see nothing else but his swollen, throbbing cock slamming into the red head's tight wet pussy, his hands gripping her hips and dragging her back onto his steel hard prick again and again until-

"Do it." Nero murmured. He had moved from the bed without Rhonan noticing, and now stood behind his shoulder. The woman was stretched out on the bed, her legs spread, her fingers stroking her pussy and giving Rhonan a full view of what was his for the taking.

"*Fuck* her." Nero urged tightly.

Eve of Passion

A shudder ran through Rhonan's sensitive body. His cock was wet with his own need. But the feel of Nero hovering so close, his voice urging him on...it cleared Rhonan's mind. Nero was trying to use the woman to break him. To give in to lust once would only weaken him the next time, until Nero had him fully under his control. And to be with a woman other than Eve...would surely break him and reduce him to the very thing Nero desired him to be; a mindless warrior with no sense of what was right.

But there was nothing left for Nero to take from him, no weapon with which to break him.

"No." Rhonan muttered thickly. He tore his eyes from the woman and moved towards the door in long, heavy strides.

"You will." Nero said. "In time, you will. No man can resist the beast within forever. And once you stop resisting...you'll be at peace."

Rhonan grabbed the door and ripped it open.

"Vanquish Eve from your mind." Nero shot at his back as he stepped through the doorway. "You're never gonna have her!"

Rhonan slammed the door on the man and his stinging words.

Words that cut and sliced...and rang true.

Chapter 10

33

"Come with me to the festival." Marcus set the pail of fresh milk on the table. "You haven't been to town in days. You need to get out of the house, away from cleaning and chores. Come with me."

Eve placed a thin cheesecloth over the top of a large glass jar, picked up the pail of milk and began to pour it through the cloth, filtering out the particles of dirt and stray hair.

"I'm fine with staying home." She said quietly. "I don't mind the cleaning and chores."

"I know you don't mind it." Marcus said. "But everyone needs a day off."

When the jar was full, Eve peeled off the soiled cloth, placed a clean piece of cloth over the top and wrapped a band around it to hold it in place. She set the jar aside and grabbed another empty one, repeating the process with the remainder of the milk in the pail.

"I don't want to go to town." Eve told her brother. "You go, have a good time."

Marcus came and stood beside her. "Are you afraid you'll see Rhonan?"

Eve stiffened. A funny, disturbing ache squeezed her chest and sent a tingling tightness creeping up her neck into her jaw. "I'm not *afraid* of seeing him. I really don't care. The man means nothing to me. I don't know why you keep trying to make something of nothing."

Marcus shrugged and looked down at her. "I'm not so sure it is nothing. You seem get tense and defensive every time you hear his name."

"I do not." Eve snapped, then winced at the sharpness as well as the defensiveness in her tone. Marcus was right, of course. She did tense up whenever Rhonan was mentioned. But she *wasn't* afraid to see him. Why should she be? Granted, she found the man sexually stimulating...but that was just *flesh*. And if she couldn't resist the flesh, she would not still be a virgin.

Marcus was staring down at her, the weight of his eyes were like bricks on her shoulders. Her brother was a very perceptive man, especially when it came to her. He read her like a book, regardless of how hard she tried to keep the pages from turning. Sometimes she believed Marcus knew her better than she knew herself. And if that were the case...

"Why is that every time I talk to you lately," Marcus said, drawing her back. "You just fade out on me?"

Eve glanced up, blinked. "What?"

"My point exactly." Marcus smirked. He pushed away from the counter. "So. Are you coming to the festival with me?"

Eve shook her head. "No."

"As you wish." Marcus chimed and left the kitchen.

Eve of Passion

Eve finished with the jars of milk and set them aside. A deep breath she hadn't known she was suppressing, suddenly escaped her, relieving her of her strength as well. She sank down in a chair at the table and rested her head in her hands. She was so tired, but when she tried to sleep she was tortured by her dreams. Sometimes they were dreams of her father's death. Other times, dreams of Rhonan's touch. Now and then, her dreams forged and she saw Rhonan's face on the gladiator who took her father's life. That dream was the worst. The one she awoke from sobbing uncontrollably and aching so bad it overwhelmed her with nausea. It was that dream the reinforced her resilience to put Rhonan from her mind.

Of course, he wasn't the one who had killed her father. But after discovering Nero's seal on his arm...he had begun to represent that gladiator in her dreams, and at times even in her conscious mind.

Eve could hear Marcus in his room, rifling around. She hadn't told Marcus about Rhonan being branded. What would he do if he knew? Would he still think Rhonan was the man for her? How could he...after what had happened to their father? How could he be in favor of her having anything to do with one of Nero's warriors?

Marcus was coming back towards the kitchen. Eve slowly raised her head - and stiffened suddenly as Marcus stepped into the doorway.

"What...what're you doing with that?" Eve trembled.

Marcus held up the sword in its sheath. "It's father's sword."

"I know it's father's sword." Eve rose slowly from the table, her legs shaking. "What are you *doing* with it?"

Marcus shrugged and grinned, drawing the sword from its casing. He swung it around slowly, with grace and skill. "I'm going to enter the games."

Eve lunged around the table and grabbed the handle of the sword, halting it in a mid-arc.

"Be careful!" Marcus lowered the sword.

"You are not entering the games." Eve said stiffly, her eyes burning. "Don't you dare."

Marcus frowned and returned the sword to the sheath. He set it on the table and looked at his sister. "What is wrong with you, Eve?"

"What is *wrong* with me?" Eve repeated incredulously. "Our father *died* with this sword in his hand...while engaging in a *game*."

Marcus gripped her shoulders gently as tears stung her eyes. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "These aren't those kind of games, Eve. What happened to father was a grave injustice, orchestrated by an evil man. I'm not really going to be fighting, it's just for show. For the entertainment of the crowd."

"That's what they told our father." Eve whispered. Her voice was shaking.

Marcus pulled her into his arms and held her tight. He kissed her hair. "Eve, I promise, this isn't anything like that. It's just a street show, that's all. No one controlling anything."

Eve pulled away and moved around the table. "Why do you need a real sword then?" She stared at her father's sword, images from the past flashing through her head. He'd fought so hard, fought so well. But not well enough to defeat a seasoned gladiator.

Eve of Passion

"Real swords are always used." Marcus said. "But no one is actually struck. It's a game of skill and precision. The fighting is meant to look as real as possible without it actually *being* real. The players train extensively for this. *I've* trained for this."

Eve's head snapped up. "What?" She breathed. "When?"

"Whenever." Marcus said. "I grabbed time here and there to get training in."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Eve asked tightly.

"*Why?*" Marcus chuckled. "This is why. I knew how you felt about sword fighting, in any form. You wouldn't have let up on me until I quit."

"Yes." Eve hissed. "That's right. Father always told us - if you live by the sword, you'll die by the sword. What happened to him was not his choice. But you have a choice."

"For God's sake, Eve." Marcus snapped suddenly. "Calm down. It's just a fucking game." He grabbed the sword off the table and stormed towards the door. "I don't need your permission. You know, we'd both be a hell of a lot better off if you'd pull that stick out of your ass and confess what's really bothering you. Because your problem isn't with the past. It's with the fact that you're in love with Rhonan and you just can't admit it to yourself."

Marcus left the house, slamming the door behind him. Eve stared after him in shocked silence. Marcus never shouted at her. Rarely even got upset with her.

His words stung as surely as if he'd physically slapped her. As her shock slowly faded, indignation rose in its place. She was not in love with Rhonan. How could he even think that? She didn't even *like* the man.

But her earlier thoughts pressed at her mind.

Marcus knows you better than you know yourself.

34

Rhonon stood beside the other other gladiator. The man was shorter than Rhonan, muscular, and well skilled. He had seen the man fight. Rhonan didn't fear the man and would defeat him, if Nero declared they go to battle. But he didn't believe that was Nero's purpose for calling them here. A dread of something worse weighed heavily on Rhonan.

Nero sat at a thick polished table, eating fruit and roasted duck. Rhonan's face pinched with disgust as juices from both the fruit and the meat dribbled from the corner of Nero's mouth. The man ate like a pig.

Rhonon's hands were clasp behind his back, his body rigid and face hard. The shorter gladiator, though standing at attention, didn't resonate the same depth of hatred for the governor. Of course, it had been his choice to be branded and owned by the filthy hog. And that alone made it impossible for Rhonan to respect the fighter.

Nero finally wiped his mouth, slid his chair back and stood. "Today the street games take place." He said as he began to pace back and forth before the two men. "Most of the participants aren't worthy of my time. But occasionally a young man emerges on the streets with the potential to compete."

Eve of Passion

Rhonan's brow furrowed tightly. "Compete?" He spoke low, tight. "Compete where?"

"The arena." Nero said. "In the exhibitions. Fifteen days from now."

Rhonan's temples began to throb. Nero's plan was to pick a kid off the street and throw him into the arena with a gladiator?

"The two of you will be the featured gladiators. So I'm allowing you to go out and choose your opponents."

"I only fight gladiators." Rhonan growled low. "I won't go into the arena and face off with a boy."

Nero smiled dully. "Your nobility is honorable. But you have nothing to fear. It is simply a show. Entertainment for the people."

"I know how you entertain the people." Rhonan snapped. "And I will not pick a kid off the street and usher him to his death."

Nero's smile slowly faded like melting ice. His eyes turned to hot coals. "You will do whatever I tell you to do. Your will is no longer your own."

"I will not battle a kid." Rhonan hissed.

"Then choose a man. One who can fight." Nero said quietly. "But you will come back with an opponent. And if you do not, I will choose one for you."

"Why not let the gladiators battle?" Rhonan asked tightly. "Why bring in men and boys off the street?"

Nero smiled then chuckled. "I give the people what they want. It gives them a rush to know that any one of them could be the one in the arena, facing down his own impending death."

"You are a filthy pig." Rhonan growled deeply.

Again, the smile drained from Nero's face. He moved close to Rhonan's shoulder and spoke low. "You would do well to show respect to your master. Our *contract* depends on it. Of course, if you wish to breach that contract, you can die a slow and painful death watching me *fuck* your dear Eve into submission. The last image you will see in this life is my *cock* beating all dignity from within her until all she knows how to be is a *whore*."

Rhonan's jaw clenched with enough force to make his head pound and throb. His hands loosened from behind his back and hung tense at his sides, his hands flexing into tight fists. His chest rose and fell with the force of the rage swelling inside him.

"And the last sound you hear..." Nero hissed from behind Rhonan. "...is your lovely Eve screaming in pain and anguish as I rape her repeatedly...then give my men a turn at her."

The gladiator standing beside Rhonan chuckled. "I'd fuck her."

Rhonan's elbow nailed him in the side of the head before the man even registered Rhonan's movement. He dropped hard and convulsed on the floor. Rhonan was barely aware of his own actions when he was suddenly gripping Nero by the throat, his face twisted in rage.

Eve of Passion

"You so much as *look* at Eve." Rhonan spit close to his face. "And I'll rip your fucking head off with my own fucking hands."

Nero's throat worked beneath Rhonan's tight grip as he dug his fingers into Rhonan's hand, trying to pry him loose. "Release me...now..." Nero croaked, his eyes burning. "Or you can...consider our contract...void." A strangled laugh squeezed up his throat. "And Eve...will go back...on the market. And we both know...you won't be around...to protect her."

Rhonan's hand squeezed just a little tighter then suddenly released. Nero staggered away a few feet, coughing and massaging his throat. He glared at Rhonan. "If you were just another fighter...you would be dead now."

The other gladiator crawled to his feet, a bit unsteady. Rhonan shot him a deadly look and the man kept his distance.

Nero coughed hard and wiped spit from the corner of his mouth. "Go. Now. Choose your opponent."

Rhonan stood unmoving as the other gladiator turned and walked away in obedience, his steps a little off center as he rubbed the side of his head.

"I know you're no pussy." Nero said coldly. "But it's time you faced reality. I've got you by the balls and holding you over a cliff. You learn to follow orders...and Eve will be left alone. But..." Nero stepped forward and thrust his finger in Rhonan's face. "*But* if you step across that line again...it's over. I won't have you killed. I will have you chained up where you can hear her cries and screams as me and my men fuck her until there's nothing left of the woman you sold your life for."

Rhonan swallowed tightly. Every instinct inside him told him to kill Nero now. Take his chances. But he knew if he made one wrong move, if he were caught...Eve would be the one to suffer for it. Even with Nero dead, those loyal to him would see to it that Eve paid for Rhonan's sins.

"Are we understanding one another?" Nero asked quietly, his voice chipped with ice.

Rhonan clenched his jaw tighter and nodded slowly.

"*Say* it." Nero hissed.

The words were like rocks in his throat and they tasted like shit as he ground out each one. "Yes...we understand one another."

Chapter 11

35

"Hey!"

Marcus turned at the sound of the familiar voice. His eyes darted over and around the sea of town folks flowing this way and that. He finally spotted John, grinned and worked his way through the throng of people.

"Hey." Marcus and John clasped arms. "Are you ready?"

John grinned and nodded. He was barely an inch shorter than Marcus with wiry red hair and freckled skin. He was built like an ox and ugly as sin, but Marcus was consistently amazed by his ability for attracting the young women. Amazed - but not really shocked. John was a good man with an irresistible sense of humor. And his fighting skills easily matched those of Marcus, and even surpassed him.

"I haven't seen that before." John nodded toward the sword strapped to Marcus' side.

Marcus unsheathed the weapon. "It was my father's." Marcus swung it skillfully in an arc. His voice thickened as he added, "He died with this sword in his hand...fighting in the arena."

John's grin faltered. "I'm sorry."

Clearing his throat, Marcus stuffed the sword back in its sheath. "Thanks. But it was a long time ago."

"What does Eve think about you using it?" John looked at him with one eyebrow raised, a half cocked grin on his face. John knew Eve well.

Marcus laughed and shook his head. "She don't think much of it, that's for sure." He shrugged. "We got into a bit of a fight about it."

"Eve is fiery." John grinned. "But she'll calm down. You know she can't stay mad at you."

Marcus nodded, grinned and started to respond when he noticed two gladiators coming down the street on horseback. Rhonan was in the lead, riding ahead of the other gladiator.

"What is it?" John followed his stare. His face darkened. "Rhonan. What a waste."

Marcus frowned and shot his friend a hard look. "What?"

"You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?" Marcus asked slowly.

John shook his head. "He sold his sword to Nero. Took his seal. Nero owns him now."

A hard frown gouged Marcus' brow. "What the hell are you talking about? Rhonan has never allowed others to dictate his fighting. That doesn't make sense."

John shrugged. "I know. But look who he's riding with."

Eve of Passion

Marcus glanced at the other gladiator. "Who?"

"That's Nathan. One of Nero's champion fighters." John scowls. "A total prick. He fights dirty. Has no respect for other fighters."

Marcus' frown deepened, cutting grooves across his forehead. He stared at the gladiators. Rhonan owned by Nero? That couldn't be. It *couldn't*. If this were true...wouldn't Eve have known? She would've surely told him. Wouldn't she?

John and Marcus stepped back as the two gladiators rode by, their horses' hooves clacking hollowly on the stone street. Rhonan shot Marcus a hard look. His eyes jumped quickly to the sword at Marcus' side then back to the younger man's face as he slowed his mount. "Go home." Rhonan spoke low, but his deep, strong voice carried easily to Marcus' ears.

"What?" Marcus frowned.

Rhonan shot a fierce look back at the approaching gladiator, then drilled Marcus with stony eyes. "Do not join in the games today." His hard stare snapped back and forth between Marcus and John. "Both of you...stay out of them."

"Do not discourage the young swordsmen." Nathan chided as he approached behind Rhonan and halted his horse.

Marcus' attention was drawn instantly to the large, discolored knot on the gladiator's left temple. Something or someone had hit him extremely hard in the side of the head quite recently.

"Move on." Rhonan drilled the other gladiator with hard, hateful eyes.

A quick flash of fear swept through Nathan's eyes but vanished as suddenly. He was intimidated by Rhonan, but was clearly too arrogant to back down.

"Give us a show." Nathan directed the request at Marcus and John. "Display your swordsmanship."

"No." Rhonan pulled his mount around so it stood between Nathan and the two younger men. From this angle, Marcus got a clear view of the seal burned into Rhonan's arm.

An unexpected dread settled heavily in his stomach. He wasn't sure why, but it was there, making him feel sick. Why in hell would Rhonan do such a thing? Apparently even he had his price, and Nero had found it. A seed of anger sprouted inside him. He didn't understand why Rhonan's decision to sell out to Nero bothered him so much, but suddenly he was filled with indignation towards the man.

Marcus stepped around Rhonan's large steed defiantly, his face hard and determined as he met Nathan's stare. "We'll give you a show."

He could feel both John's and Rhonan's eyes burning into him. Rhonan swung down from his mount and shoved Marcus back. "What the fuck are you doing?" He growled.

Marcus trembled under the gladiator's sudden fury, but he refused to stand down. "I came here today to join the games and that is what I am going to do."

Eve of Passion

Rhonon suddenly had a fistful of Marcus's shirt and shoved him hard against the wall. "Go home." Rhonon hissed harshly, his stony face close to Marcus'.

"What are you doing?" Eve's high voice suddenly cut through the afternoon like a piercing dagger thrust through the air.

36

"Get your hands off him!"

Rhonon's head snapped around and found himself seared by Eve's fiery eyes. Before he could react, she rushed forward and ripped his hand loose from Marcus' shirt. Rhonon stepped back slowly, feeling stunned in her presence. The last time he'd been this close to her, they had been...

His pulse raced as a sudden, unbidden heat coursed through him. Through the haze that was closing in around him - he heard Nathan laugh.

"How lovely." Nathan roared, loud enough to draw attention from bystanders. "The mighty Rhonon commanded by a woman."

Rhonon glanced fiercely at the other gladiator. Clearly he hadn't learned a damn thing from the elbow to the head.

"Don't ever touch my brother again." Eve hissed, standing between him and Marcus.

Marcus' face twisted in anger. "I don't need you to defend me." He spit at his sister, surely embarrassed to have a woman come to his aid. He stormed away.

Eve shot a frustrated look after him then turned her burning eyes on Rhonon again. "Just stay away from me and my brother."

"Eve..." Rhonon started but Eve shook her head and whirled away.

"Just leave us alone." She threw back at him.

Rhonon's pulse throbbed violently in his head. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched her moving away from him. His face ached as he clenched his jaw forcefully.

Fuck!

"I'm beginning to understand why you sold your freedom for her." Nathan smirked. "Too bad you didn't receive anything in return. You'd think there'd be some gratitude. At least one good fuck."

Rhonon's hands gripped the sword strapped to his side until his wrist and forearm began to throb with pain. "You'd be wise to shut your mouth." Rhonon ground out between clenched teeth. "Before I cut out your tongue."

Mounting up, he nudged the large horse forward. The crowds flowing through the street parted, allowing the massive steed passage down the center. Rhonon sat rigid in the saddle and stared straight ahead as the horse cantered smoothly down the stone street.

37

Eve had lost sight of Marcus as she fought her way through the throng of townsfolk. Her chest hurt from the ache gripping her so fiercely. She fought the tears burning her eyes, blurring her vision and causing the crowd to swim before her. She hadn't intended on coming to town. But she'd wanted to find Marcus and apologize. But somehow she'd made things worse. Why did Rhonan have to be there? She felt as if she couldn't get away from him. Everywhere she turned - there he was.

As if the thought had materialized into a physical force, the echoing clack of heavy horse hooves against stone filled her head. Her eyes were pulled to the street. Across the top of the festival crowd, she saw Rhonan moving swiftly through the sea of people on the back of the large white steed. His face was tight and hard, his stony eyes looking ahead. He sat atop the big horse with a stiff posture.

An unbidden image flashed through her mind of the first time she'd seen him riding down that same street. His strong body had moved in perfect sync with the horse, his face relaxed, an arrogant smile playing on his lips. She remembered feeling annoyed by the man, and disgusted with the way the girls swooned over him. But watching him now, it was as if all the life and pride had drained out of him. And she was startled to find herself longing to see that arrogant smile on his lips again, his entire persona resonating that irritating self-assurance he'd displayed when he'd first come to her home after she had declined his invitation.

The tears were sliding down her face before she realized they had escaped her eyes. "What happened to you?" She whispered. Her eyes closed, unable to look any longer at the rigid shell of a man he'd become seemingly overnight.

"The answer." A deep, strong masculine voice spoke behind her. "May be more than you're prepared to hear."

Eve spun around, startled, nearly colliding with the thick, muscular chest of the gladiator she'd seen Rhonan talking and laughing with at the celebration. The events of that night swept through her mind on fast forward.

"You're..." Eve breathed out. She didn't know his name.

"Gabriel."

38

A strong hand grabbed Marcus' shoulder and he whipped around. John stepped back. "Hold up, brother, it's just me."

"Sorry." Marcus mumbled.

"Are we going to join the games?"

Marcus stared off through the crowd blankly. "Why would Rhonan tell us not to?" He asked quietly. He looked at John. "Why should he take interest in something so trivial?"

John shrugged. "Who knows." He grinned and tapped his head. "As far as I'm concerned, all those gladiators got to have bats in their belfries to go into the arena in the first place."

Marcus shook his head and laughed despite the troubling sensation in his gut.

Drawing his sword, John held the weapon up and cocked his head at Marcus. "To battle?"

Eve of Passion

Marcus nodded slowly, drew his sword and touched it to John's blade. "To battle." Both men laughed and sheathed their swords and began to weave their way through the crowd.

A woman sidestepped to avoid a couple young boys rushing through the crowd, battling with wooden swords, and collided with Marcus. Marcus caught her quickly as she started to fall and set her on her feet. He could barely see her face from beneath the hooded cloak as she ducked her head in respect.

"Forgive me, sire." She whispered softly.

Marcus touched her chin and lifted her face. As her head slowly raised, a pair of deep green eyes gazed up at him from beneath dark lashes. Fiery red tendrils framed her lovely face. Marcus took an unsteady step back as if she had reached and physically pushed him. His pulse quickened so suddenly he lost his breath.

"No harm done." He breathed.

A gust of wind rushed by and swept the hood off her head, revealing her flowing red hair which caught in the breeze and lifted and floated on the air, exposing her slender neck and an odd X like scar just below her ear. Their eyes held, locked. Marcus' heart beat at the inside of his chest wall. He tried to speak but his throat had closed and his brain was beginning to fog as an unexpected ache coiled in his groin.

"Come on, Marcus." John was suddenly clutching his arm, jerking on him. "You don't want any of that."

The woman immediately dropped her eyes and ducked her head, tugging the hood back up. She turned quickly and fled.

Marcus found his voice and called after her, "Wait!"

John yanked on his arm. "Let her go, Marcus."

Marcus spun on him. "What the hell?" He snapped. "Did you see her?" Marcus turned and looked back in the direction she had hurried away. His voice lowered to a near whisper, "She was so..."

"Marked." John spoke low.

"What?" Marcus faced him again, frowning.

"You didn't see it?" John tapped his neck below his ear. "She was marked." Sympathy flicked through his eyes as he stared at his friend. "Nero brands his warriors...and he marks his whores."

Marcus turned slowly and stared off through the crowd but the woman had been swallowed up. His heart was still pounding against his ribcage. No woman had ever had such an immediate effect on him. Or a lingering one. A tightness gripped his lower abdomen then spread up into his chest, squeezing hard.

Nero's whore.

He realized he and Eve now had something in common; they both desired what belonged to Nero.

Chapter 12

40

The large black horse cut sharply in front of the woman, halting her. She didn't have to raise her eyes to know who the rider was. His seal was stamped into the horse's breast collar.

"You know the rules, Isabelle." Nero's rigid voice stung her ears. "You don't speak with a man unless I give you permission to do so."

"M'Lord?" Isabelle spoke soft, low, respectful. Her pulse quickened. Nero had witnessed her encounter with the young man? Marcus, his friend had called him.

Nero's gaze rested heavily on her, like a weight pushing her down. "Do you like the boy?" He asked, startling her. Suddenly he was leaning down and his fingers were on her chin, lifted her face, drawing her eyes to his.

"M'Lord, I..." She stumbled on her words. If she said *no*, he would know she was lying. But if she admitted to her fondness of the young man...would he punish her?

"It's quite all right, Isabelle." Nero spoke low, with an uncharacteristic softness to his voice. "You're a young woman. It's only natural to be drawn to a young man of his stature." An unsettling smile touched his lips. "Would you like if I brought him in, gave him to you?"

Isabelle's breath caught softly. "I-I don't understand, M'Lord."

"You've served me well." He smiled. "Perhaps you deserve a gift."

Lowering her head, Isabelle's heart raced wildly. "You are too kind, M'Lord." She raised her eyes slowly and tentatively touched his leg. "But you are the only man I desire."

Nero's smile stretched his lips. "You are a treasure, Isabelle." Nero pulled the horse around and rode away with a loud clacking of hooves against stone.

Isabelle stared after him, her chest pounding. Marcus' face rose in her mind. Such a beautiful, perfect man. She would not allow Nero to mar him. The young man deserved a woman of purity, untouched and free from bondage. And though her dreams would be overwhelmed with his lovely smile, the warm feel of his hands...she would not subject such a man to her world of iniquity.

41

Nero circled the steed around the rear of Nathan's mount and rested in the saddle next to the gladiator as they both watched the young man wield his sword against his mock opponent. Both boys were matched in skill, equally worthy of the arena, but Nero's gaze moved with the object of Isabelle's affection.

He wasn't fooled by her professions of desire. She harbored great bitterness in her heart for him, for taking her from her family when she was just a young girl. But even then, her beauty had captivated him. He could not resist her, and he had brought her to womanhood much sooner than the average girl. She had never known the love of a young man. Had never been courted and adored. All she knew were the ways of a whore. The men who touched her did so for their own selfish pleasure and nothing more.

Eve of Passion

Nero's lips twitched as he watched the young man. Regardless of Isabelle's attempt to conceal her desire for the boy, Nero wasn't without sight. He saw what she wanted. And as he had told her...perhaps she deserved a gift.

"Him." Nero nodded at the dark haired young man. "He will fight in the exhibition."

Nathan turned his head and smiled. "Sire? Do you know of who you speak?"

Nero stared at him.

"The young, skillful swordsman you've chosen." Nathan spoke low. "Is brother to Rhonan's beloved Eve."

Eve's Brother? Nero smiled as his eyes narrowed. "Then I believe I have the perfect opponent for him to challenge in the arena."

Nathan grinned. "One day, sire...you will surely wake with Rhonan's sword at your throat."

Nero laughed. "You may be right, my friend." He laughed again. "You may be right."

42

Eve walked home in a daze. Every step of the way her weak, shaky legs threatened to give out, but somehow held. She couldn't calm her heart and it caused her breath to puff from between her parted lips. The well of tears behind her eyes seemed bottomless as a continual stream ran down her flushed cheeks.

Rhonan had given up everything...for *her*?

She had convinced herself that Rhonan's ultimate goal for pursuing her was simply to bed her. But in truth...a man such as Rhonan would have no problem filling his bed. She had believed that it was her resistance that drove him to break her, weaken her to his will.

Sobs shook her and she hugged herself tightly as each step sent up a little plume of dust from the dirt road. Rhonan would not have sold himself to Nero for a woman he merely desired with his body alone. But Eve couldn't accept what the alternative truly meant. She couldn't be the reason for such a choice. She *wouldn't* be.

The image of Rhonan hovered behind her eyes. The stiff, lifeless way he had moved through the crowds in town.

He was dead inside because of what he had done for her.

43

"Why didn't you tell me about Rhonan?"

Eve was standing at the stove when Marcus came in, her back to him. Every nerve in her body had surfaced and knew she was about to break down. Again. But she swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked at the tears.

"What are you talking about?" She whispered thickly, trying to focus and not burn the food in the pan.

Eve of Passion

Marcus closed the door, a bit too hard. "Rhonan fighting for Nero." He said stiffly. "You knew, didn't you? That's why you resisted him."

Eve shook her head slowly. "I didn't know at first." She spoke low, her tears in her voice. "I just didn't want to be with a gladiator. And then, when I found out about Nero...you know I could never be with a man who...willingly gave his sword to such a man."

"I don't get it." Marcus said. "Rhonan has never fought for anyone, never been owned by anyone. Why the hell would he do this?" He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hook on the door. "Maybe everyone does have their price." He muttered, and there was a note of despair in his voice that cut at Eve. Marcus had really liked the man, she could see that every time he mentioned his name or saw him. He looked up to him, kind of like the older brother he never had. And now...it was as if Rhonan had let him down.

A tear escaped and slid down Eve's face. Rhonan didn't deserve Marcus' resentment or lack of respect. She wanted to blurt out that it was *her* fault, that he'd done it to protect her, but for reasons she didn't understand, she couldn't say the words. Perhaps she felt ashamed to be the cause of Rhonan's undoing. Such a great warrior, a powerful man...brought to his knees by a common peasant girl.

"I'm sorry I pushed you at him." Marcus said. "I was wrong. He's not the man I thought he was."

Eve broke. She spun around, her tears flowing. "Shut up, Marcus!" She cried. "Just shut up!" She covered her mouth with her hand, crying harder as she fled the kitchen and ran to her room.

Laying huddled on her bed, Eve sobbed into the pillow. She didn't know Marcus had followed her until his hand touched her shoulder. She flinched and choked on her sobs, "I'm sorry, Marcus." She shuddered. "I-I didn't mean to yell at you."

Marcus turned her around and laid her head on his leg as he stroked her hair. "Eve...what's going on?" He asked softly. "What's wrong?"

She gripped his leg and cried against his thigh. "Oh Marcus...what have I done?"

Marcus frowned. "What are you talking about, sis?"

She sat up slowly, her face flushed and wet with tears. She struggled to force down her sobs as her chest hitched. "It's my fault." She trembled as her eyes swam. "It's all my fault." The tears broke again and she pressed her face against his chest. "I treated him so bad, Marcus. He sacrificed his life for me and I...I just threw him away."

Gripping her shoulders firmly, Marcus drew her back and looked in her eyes, his brow tightly furrowed. "What are you talking about, Eve?"

Her hand shook as she wiped her eyes. "I-I didn't tell you everything about...the night of the celebration." She whispered, her voice shaking. "Something happened, Marcus."

Eve struggled with her tears as she told Marcus how Nero had taken her from Rhonan's side and taken her to his chambers. Cried softly as she recalled what he had nearly done to her, but then stopped at the last minute when someone had come to the door and given him a message.

"Rhonan stopped him." She choked out. "It had to have been Rhonan. Nero wanted his sword, lusted for it. Rhonan...he bargained his freedom...for me." She fell against Marcus' chest. Her tears refused to stop. She

Eve of Passion

wondered if someone could actually drown in their own sorrow? "What am I going to do, Marcus?" She cried softly. "I can't let this happen."

Marcus stroked her hair. His chest rose and fell hard. She knew he was seething inside over what Nero had done - both to her and to Rhonan. "It's already done, Eve." He spoke low, tight. "Rhonan is branded. Only Nero can release him. And he will never turn loose a fighter such as Rhonan."

"No." Eve cleared her throat and swallowed her tears as she sat up. "No. There has to be something. I-I could speak to Nero-"

"No!" Marcus grabbed her suddenly, gripping her arms, startling her. "Stay away from Nero, do you hear me? Don't ever go anywhere near that man again."

"But, Marcus." Eve sobbed.

"No!" Marcus growled. "Promise me, Eve. Promise me you'll stay away from him."

Eve shuddered. Another hard sob shook her.

"I promise, Marcus." She softly lied.

Chapter 13

44

As night crept in, Eve laid in the darkness of her room, her heart and mind still struggling to comprehend and absorb all that Gabriel had told her. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift back to that first day in town, the day Rhonan had invited her to join him at the celebration. He had reeked of arrogance and self assurance, deliberately extending the invitation before all, so she would feel compelled to accept. And the boldness he had displayed when he had come to her home.

Eve opened her eyes slowly and stared out the window. Night pressed at the glass. Her eyes were wet, dripping tears. She had been so frustrated with the man, with his male ego and his assumption that she would just fall at his feet like the other foolish women. He'd looked at her with the confidence that he could make her his own. And it had angered her. But she realized now that she hadn't really been angered by his arrogance...but because she knew he was right. And she had wanted to believe she could resist a man such as him. But she couldn't and it had mortified her to think she would eventually be used by him and thrown away, meaning nothing to him. She had fought against him so hard because Marcus was right, she did love him...and she had been so convinced it wasn't within a man like Rhonan to truly love a woman in return.

A deep anguish clenched her heart. She had been so focused on keeping him away, she hadn't noticed when his desire had turned to love. Out in the barn, when they'd come so close to making love...he had tried to explain when she'd discovered Nero's seal on his arm. He'd tried to tell her right then and there. But she'd refused to listen, thinking there could be no viable excuse for what he'd done.

No viable excuse.

Eve sobbed into her pillow, her body trembling. She longed to go back to that moment, knowing what she knew now. She wouldn't have told him to stop, she wouldn't have sent him away. She would have given him everything he had sacrificed his life for; her body, her heart, her mind. Her undying love.

Still trembling, Eve sat up slowly. She couldn't leave it like this. No matter what Marcus said, there had to be a way.

When Eve laid back down, sleep refused to come. She watched the sky outside slowly lighten as dawn approached. She listened to Marcus stirring in the kitchen, pulling on his boots and leaving the house to begin his chores. But all she could see was Rhonan's face, the emptiness and lifelessness in him as he rode down the street yesterday. She ached to have back the arrogant man full of self assurance.

When she finally left the bed, she went to the kitchen, fixed Marcus some breakfast and put in on the back of the stove to keep warm then scribbled her brother a note, laying it in the center of the table where it couldn't be missed. Then she slipped out the door before she lost her courage.

45

Isabelle closed her eyes and imagined it was Marcus there with her, touching her, forging inside her body, claiming her in every way a man can claim a woman.

"I have a gift for you, Isabelle." Nero gasped against her ear, shattering her fantasy as he thrust himself into her with little grace.

Eve of Passion

Isabelle clung to his damp, heated body and responded to his every movement as was her duty.

"Marcus will fight in the exhibition." Nero rubbed his lips over her ear. "A special show just for you."

Isabelle stiffened, her heart racing. Marcus? He was going to put Marcus in the arena?

"No." She whispered unsteadily. "Please, M'Lord...don't."

Nero drew back and stared down in her face. Her eyes shimmered with tears. "So you are fond of the young man."

Flushing, Isabelle turned her eyes away.

"Fear not, my love." Nero kissed her lips, lingering until she responded. "He will not be harmed. It is merely for show. Entertainment."

A deep fear gripped Isabelle. She knew about Nero's exhibitions. Men died there.

"He will face Rhonan." Nero added as he drew back and sat on his heels. He grabbed her hips and pulled her hard onto his cock, stealing her breath. His thrusts intensified as he began to fuck her with urgency, panting with force.

Isabelle closed her eyes again, her breath sharp and turning to small cries as he brought her quickly to orgasm. She clawed the bed and arched her body, crying out sharply as she gave him what he craved. He leaned over her, his face tight with sexual tension as he fucked her hard and deep, driving his cock into her with the fierce need to release.

A loud, swelling groan erupted from Nero as he slammed his cock deep inside her and filled her with his hot fluids. When he lifted himself off her and lay on his back beside her, breath ragged, she knew what was expected of her.

Isabelle opened her eyes and moved down between his legs where she took his wet, heavy cock in her hands and then her mouth. It relaxed him to have her suck his cock immediately after he released.

When the knock on the door came, Nero groaned in annoyance. "Come!"

A house boy entered tentatively. "M'Lord, there is a young lady requesting to speak with you."

Nero propped himself up on the pillows as Isabelle continued to suck his cock.

"Send her in." Nero said.

46

When Eve entered Nero's chambers, she faltered, flushing at the scene before her. She lowered her eyes and kept them averted.

"Well, well." Nero murmured in awe. "If it isn't the lovely Eve. The heart of my greatest warrior. To what do I owe this honor?"

Eve of Passion

Now that she was here, witnessing first hand the duty of Nero's women, Eve's courage began to waver. Could she go through with this? But Rhonan's face hovered behind her eyes and she knew that she could. She had to. Rhonan was not meant for captivity. It would kill the strong and powerful man that he was. She could already see it happening.

"Well, speak up, my lady." Nero urged, then slid away from the red haired woman and stood up. Eve avoided looking at him until he wrapped a robe around himself.

The woman huddled on the bed, naked and exposed. He gave her no covering. Her eyes caught Eve's for a brief moment, and Eve sensed a deep sadness and emptiness in the woman. Eve glanced away quickly before the reality of what she was doing sent her fleeing from the room.

Nero approached her. "Tell me, lovely Eve...what brings you to my humble home?"

"I wish to...to speak to you concerning Rhonan, M'Lord." Her voice was shaking but she didn't know how to calm it.

"And what about the great Rhonan?"

Nero moved past her to the table and poured himself some wine.

Eve shot a quick glance at the woman on the bed then turned and faced the man she hated most in this life. "I came to request you release him from the bond of seal." Spoken aloud, she realized how ridiculous her request sounded.

Apparently Nero agreed, for he chuckled loud. "So the great and mighty Rhonan now sends a woman to do his bidding?" He sipped the wine as his eyes hardened. "And his begging?"

"No, sire." Eve forced down the rage bubbling inside her. She hated his implications, as if Rhonan weren't man enough to speak on his own behalf. "He doesn't know I have come here. He would not have allowed me to do so, had he known."

Nero gazed at her with an amusement that boiled her blood. "So I assume you have come with something to bargain with?"

Eve trembled. "Yes, sire." She swallowed tightly. "I ask that you take me in his stead. If you will release him, I will stay with you, willingly...for as long as you desire." Hearing the words out loud filled Eve with a crippling sickness and dread. But she refused to take it back.

Nero chuckled again and approached her, moving up close behind her. Eve shuddered as he ran his hands up her arms and breathed in her scent. "Not since Isabelle here." he moaned. "Has a woman stirred me with such passion and desire." He touched his lips to her shoulder. "I do so lust for you, Eve. And we can surely discuss this proposal to greater lengths...after the exhibitions. Even for a delicacy such as you, I cannot forfeit my greatest warrior."

"No." Eve moved away from him and turned. "I'm proposing this now."

"So you wish me to make my decision in this very moment, is that it?" Nero murmured.

Eve trembled. "Yes."

Eve of Passion

Nero moved in close again. "Well, before I chose...I should at least be allowed to see what it is I would be getting." He moved around behind her and pressed his body firm against hers.

Eve swallowed thickly and closed her eyes. Nero's erection was evident. He slid his arms around her and began tugging up the front of her dress until his hands were probing her bare thighs, his fingertips playing around her warm core. His cock was pressing hard against her backside. Eve's pulse raced wildly. What was to stop him from taking what he wanted and still refusing her request?

Nero kissed her shoulder then her neck, tasting her skin as he slipped a fingertip into her warm pussy, nudging her sensitive nub. Eve gasped softly and tensed. It filled her with nausea for this man to touch her so intimately, when she craved only Rhonan's touch.

"You're very warm, Eve." Nero murmured close to her ear. "And soft, silky." He circled her clit with his fingertip. His breath quickened a bit. "I do so want to fuck you, Eve. I want to squeeze my hard cock into your tight virgin core and make you a woman." He massaged her nub more directly, making her shudder and tremble, her body responding on pure instinct. "Cum for me, Eve." He groaned in her ear, his cock hardening fiercely. "Prove to me you're not bluffing."

Eve gasped sharp as he worked her clit, setting ablaze the woman within. She was suddenly filled with self loathing as a deep sexual pleasure gripped her and a low moan of ecstasy swelled in her throat as Nero brought her quickly to orgasm. She cried out sharply, her body convulsing beneath his stimulating touch and pressing back hard against him as she clawed his forearm.

Nero chuckled low in her ear, his breath quick. "That's good, Eve." He stroked his fingertip through his hot silky juices, teasing her ultra sensitive clit until she gasped hard again and released a second time.

Tears slid down her cheeks. She felt as if she were betraying Rhonan in her attempt to save him, but she had nothing else to bargain with. Only herself.

Forgive me, Rhonan, her heart cried as she forced herself to remain still as Nero touched her with his vile hands and mouth.

When Nero finally stepped back, taking his hands off her, Eve shuddered and quickly shoved down the hem of her dress. The woman on the bed was watching her, tears wetting her pretty face. Eve looked away in shame.

"Perhaps we can come to an arrangement." Nero spoke low as he poured himself more wine. "But I will have to think on it awhile first." Nero walked back to her, rubbing the back of his fingers down her neck. "You're asking me to give up a lot. Something I've worked very hard to get. It isn't a decision that can be made at a moment's notice. You must be willing to give me some time."

"As you wish." Eve whispered, her throat tightening. It was the best she was going to get from him and she knew it.

Eve's legs trembled unsteadily as she walked home along the dirt road. She hugged herself tightly as the realization struck her that there could be no winner in all of this.

She felt her knees hit the dirt before she knew they had buckled. Her arms tightened around herself as a heart wrenching wail swelled up in her throat and burst force into the warm afternoon air.

Eve of Passion

"Will you trade Rhonan for her?" Isabelle asked tentatively as Nero returned to the bed.

Nero smiled and fingered her thick red hair. "Jealous?"

Ducking her head, Isabelle gave him the deliberate impression that that was why she posed the question.

Nero lifted her chin with two fingertips. "No woman will take your place, darling Isabelle." He murmured. "Do not fear."

He hadn't answered her question, and she needed an answer. "Will you accept her offer, sire?"

Nero chuckled. "I will let her believe so." He murmured. "I will bed her, and let her believe she has saved the man she loves. But I will never release the greatest gladiator I've ever owned. Certainly not for a woman."

Isabelle lowered her eyes and laid her head on Nero's chest.

She had the answer she needed.

48

He was caught in the throes of the torturous dream once again. Eve's soft, sensual hands moved over his body, her warm lips kissing him and touching him in places that set his senses on fire and burned him alive.

"Eve..." He whimpered aloud, a sob sticking in his throat.

A hand touched him outside the dream and he clamped onto it on reflex, dragging the body down next to him. A sharp female gasp burst forth. Intoxicated by the dream and still drowning in Eve's kisses, Rhonan began to ravage the woman in his bed, unable to hold his hunger and passion at bay any longer. His body screamed for satisfaction and fulfillment, and though somewhere in the back of his tortured mind he knew it wasn't really Eve in his bed, he no longer had the will to resist where his anguished body was taking him. Eve was lost to him forever...what did it matter anymore who he was with?

"Sire..."

The woman's voice came from a great distance away, it seemed, but he barely heard her as his hands moved over her warm, soft flesh with a desperation unlike anything he'd experienced before.

"Sire, please." She begged, her hands pressing against his arms. "Sire, you have to listen...you have to stop her..." Tears filled her voice. "You have to stop Eve."

Eve's name on the woman's lips stopped Rhonan cold. His head cleared in an instant and he drew back quickly, staring down at the red haired woman, her green eyes wet with tears and pleading with him.

"What did you say?" He rasped.

"Eve." The woman whispered thickly. "She was here."

"What?" Rhonan hissed and sat up quick, dragging the woman with him, squeezing her arms. "What are you talking about?"

The woman winced as fresh tears filled her eyes.

Eve of Passion

Realizing he was holding her too tight, he released her and stood up. "Why would Eve come here?" He asked low, a touch of fear in his voice.

The woman gazed at him with both sadness and fear. "To bargain for your freedom." She cried softly. "But, sire, you cannot let her come here. You cannot." Her tears ran freely down her lovely face. "Your Eve is a heavenly creature...you cannot let her plunge into this hell." She trembled with sobs. "She does not belong here."

Rhonan's eyes burned as he stared at the distraught woman...and saw her for the first time. *Really* saw the woman she was. He stepped closer and touched her face. "Nor, I think, do you, my lady."

His words broke her and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing hard. Rhonan sat next to her and pulled her into his arms, pressing his lips to her hair. "Please tell me." He whispered tightly. "Please tell me what Eve has done."

She raised her head slowly and looked into his dark eyes. "I will tell you, sire." She shuddered. "But please...you must do something for me."

"What?"

She gripped his arms with a measure of desperation. "You must not let Marcus enter the arena."

Rhonan stiffened. A hard frown cut across his brow. *Marcus?*

He swallowed thickly as a new fear crept in and melded with his fear for Eve. "Tell me everything."

Chapter 14

49

"What is it?" Eve stood up slowly from the table as Marcus stood at the door, speaking to the courier.

The young man handed Marcus a sealed note then left. Marcus closed the door and slowly turned around, staring at the item in his hand.

"Marcus?" Eve pressed. "What is it?"

"It has...Nero's seal."

"What?" Eve swallowed tightly and stood quickly. "What is Nero sending you?"

Marcus opened the note. He read it silently.

Eve's hands flexed anxiously at her sides. Why would Nero be contacting her brother? "Marcus?"

Marcus' lips tightened, as did his face. "It's an official decree...to fight in the exhibition."

"What?" Eve nearly shrieked then instantly forced herself to calm. "Why..."

Marcus folded the note closed and looked at Eve. "He had scouts out on the streets. While the games were going on."

"You knew this?" Eve stared at him, stunned. "You knew this and you still participated in the games? Have you lost your mind?"

Marcus looks at the note again. "I am invited to speak with him, personally."

"You're not going." Eve said tightly.

Marcus raised his eyes slowly and stared at her. "In case you forgot...I am older than you. I'm not a child. I can decide for myself."

"Marcus..."

"I have my reasons." Marcus said stiffly. "There's no harm in listening to his proposition."

Eve stepped forward grabbed his arm. "Marcus, this man is deceitful and dangerous. You should understand this as well as anyone. You know what he did to our father. How could you even consider being a part of his brutal fights? If you walk into that arena, you will *die!* Do you get it?"

"Listen to her."

Marcus and Eve gasp and spun around. Rhonan was standing in the open door, his face hard, eyes cutting past Marcus and into Eve. Eve stared at him wide-eyed. Why was Rhonan here? Anxiety gripped her as images of her last encounter with Nero flashed through her mind.

Eve of Passion

Rhonan stepped inside and closed the door hard. His burning eyes were still digging into Eve. "*Sometimes* her mind still functions properly."

Eve frowned at his emphasis on *sometimes*. "What are you-"

"You." Rhonan cut her off abruptly as his hard stare swung to Marcus, startling the young man. "You are not going anywhere near the arena. Or Nero. So get that out of your foolish head right now."

"You can't-" Marcus started but stopped short as the tip of Rhonan's sword was suddenly at his throat. His eyes widened fearfully.

"You *do not* want to argue with me right now, boy." Rhonan growled then quickly withdrew the sword, stuffing it back in its sheath. His attention returned to Eve as he spoke to Marcus in a low, forceful voice. "Now leave us. I want to have a word with your sister."

Marcus shot Eve an uncertain look. Eve nodded slowly though she didn't feel at all confident about being alone with Rhonan right now. The man was clearly angry and Eve could think of only one reason why.

"Go." Rhonan ordered as he stepped towards Eve, his rage boiling up into his eyes.

"It-it's okay, Marcus." Eve said thickly, her own fear squeezing her voice.

Marcus shot Rhonan a doubtful look then left the house. Eve stood by the kitchen doorway, her hand nervously touching the door frame.

"Rhonan...what are you doing here?" Her quiet voice shook badly, belying the fact that she knew exactly why he was there.

Rhonan stared at her, his eyes on fire. She stood rigid, waiting for the explosion she was certain was about to erupt. But when he spoke, his words were merely smoldering coals. "Why?" He asked slowly. "Why did you do it?" He moved towards her slowly, his eyes narrowed. "Why would you bargain for a freedom I willingly gave up?"

Eve swallowed tightly. Tears stung her eyes. "Because you didn't...give it up willingly."

"What are you talking about?" Rhonan stopped. His eyes narrowed even more.

"I know what you did." Eve trembled. "I know you did it...to save me from Nero." Tears slid down her face. "It wasn't right, or fair, that you should lose everything because of...because of me." She gripped the door frame as her strength seemed to seep out of her. "I don't deserve it. I-I can't let you do this. You deserve your freedom back."

Rhonan stepped forward so quick Eve barely saw him move. He grabbed her arm tightly and jerked her face up close to his. "I don't need you to rescue me." He hissed fiercely. "If I want my freedom back, I will get it on my own. I don't need the aid of a woman."

Eve closed her eyes as fresh tears seeped from beneath her dark lashes and drained down her cheeks. "It's killing you." She whispered, shaking. "Being owned by Nero...is killing you."

Rhonan's face twitched as his lips tightened. He shoved her back, releasing her. "And what do you care?" He growled. "If it kills me...you'll be rid of me once and for all. That should please you."

Eve of Passion

Eve hugged the door frame. "It wouldn't." She choked out softly, quietly.

Rhonan lunged at her, gripping the door frame above her head, looming over her like a mountain about to crash down and crush her. "And why wouldn't it?" He snarled. "You despise me. You've made that clear." His dark eyes burned into hers, the heat in them raging through her like a wild fire. His chest heaved and he shoved back away from her, turning his back. He raked his fingers through his thick hair.

Trembling, Eve stared at his strong back. Tears streaked her face. "He killed my father." She cried out suddenly, fiercely. "He killed my father and...and he let my mother die. He took everything from me and Marcus!" She was shaking. "How was I supposed to feel when you sold yourself to him to do his bidding? I hate him! I hate everything about him! Especially those who...who *fight* for him!" She was crying openly. "My father died in his exhibitions! By one of his gladiators! I watched it happen...I hated all gladiators! Especially those who belonged to *him*." She choked on her sobs. She wiped at her face with a shaking hand. "You think I hated you from the start? I didn't! When I saw his seal on you..." Eve pressed her face against the door frame and squeezed her eyes shut, crying hard. The strength in her voice died and she whispered through her tears, "I died inside...I wanted to die on the outside."

She felt Rhonan's arms around her before she even heard him move. His hands were on her face, tilting it up to his. Her eyes were still closed as his urgent, desperate mouth grabbed hers. She clutched at his shirt, clinging to him, as his kiss immersed her senses, drowning her in his fierce passion.

Rhonan's hot, starving mouth was on her throat, his hard body pinning her against the door frame. Her arms wrapped around his neck and she clutched the back of his head. Burning tears streamed from her eyes. "I'm sorry." she choked out, kissing his hair as his lips and teeth pulled at the tender skin of her throat. "I'm so sorry."

He grabbed her mouth again, silencing her words. Then she was in his arms and he was carrying her from the kitchen to her bedroom. She was barely aware of her surroundings as he laid her on the bed and covered her body with his. His mouth and hands ravaged her with urgency and intense need.

Eve didn't feel him strip away her dress, but she realized suddenly that all she could feel was his hot skin against hers, nothing between them but their intense passion and hunger for one another. Eve gasp and clutched fistfuls of his hair as his scalding mouth covered a hard nipple and sucked at her forcefully until she was arching to him and crying out.

He devoured her firm breasts as his strong fingers delved between her thighs and slid deep inside her hot, aching body. Eve cried out again and lifted her hips to his thrusting fingers. The orgasm swelled quickly, fiercely. Eve clawed at his back and screamed out her ecstasy as her body surrendered to his powerful masculine touch.

Rhonan's hot, ragged breath swirled into her mouth as he claimed her with a hard kiss. He gripped her wrists and pinned her arms above her head as his hips pressed between her thighs. Her legs parted, welcoming him. His warm tongue dove into her mouth as his thick, hard, throbbing cock drove into her aching pussy in one single forceful thrust. Eve gasped sharply into Rhonan's mouth but he didn't break the kiss as his starving body came at her with a need that overwhelmed her and ignited her with the same need.

Her legs curled around him as she began to stroke his cock with urgency, whimpering and crying through their kiss. Her hunger and need for him intensified his urgency. He released her wrists and clutched her breasts as he fucked her harder, taking her, possessing her in a way she realized she had always wanted and needed of him.

Eve of Passion

Rhonon broke their kiss suddenly and rolled them over so she was straddling him, riding him. His strong hands gripped her hips and moved her against his thrusting cock. She clutched his thick forearms and cried out, her body arching. She threw her head back and cried out his name over and over as he brought her to climax again and again.

Rhonon sat forward quick and wrapped her in his powerful arms, his mouth ravaging her throat as they made fierce and wild love, satisfying and fulfilling one another.

Growling fiercely, Rhonon spun them around again, pinning her against the bed with his strong, urgent body, his orgasm gripping him almost violently. Eve's fingers dug into the thick muscles of his back as he began to fuck her erratically, unable to control his need for release any longer.

"Oh God!" Eve cried out sharply, gasping hard as another orgasm surged through her.

"Eve!" Rhonon shouted her name in near anguish as he thrust into her and released. He clawed the blankets as his body arched and emptied his hot seed into her trembling body. His jaw clenched and his eyes squeezed shut tight as tears streaked his face, a strangled cry erupting out of him. He released a sharp gasp and sank down against her damp body, his heart racing in time with hers.

Eve's hands were shaking as she stroked her fingers through his damp hair. His breath was scalding as he panted against her throat. His arms slid around her tingling body and held her tight. He buried his face into her neck and shuddered. Eve's hand caressed down his shoulder and her fingertips tentatively played over the brand burned into his arm.

Hot tears drained from the corners of her eyes. "Please forgive me." Her whispered voice shook badly. "It's all my fault."

Rhonon shifted and moved up so he was hovering over her, staring down into her eyes. "There is no greater honor for a man." Rhonon murmured. "Than to lay down his life for the woman he loves."

Chapter 15

50

When nothing else seemed capable, exhaustion defeated Rhonan and knocked the man out. A thin sheen of sweat glistened his deep bronze skin as his head lay heavily against the pillow and his handsome face relaxed peacefully.

How long had it been since he had known such peace? Lately all his face resonated was anger, pain, and defiance. And a sense of loss - of his freedom and of Eve. Discovering Eve's love for him had brought back a measure of his life, his heart. And it resonated on his face now as he slept heavily, soundly beside her, his strong body giving off so much heat it seemed it might burn her should she touch him. But it was worth the risk.

The covers had been kicked down to the foot of the bed during their heated encounter, and Rhonan lay fully exposed, his muscular body relaxed and glossy, like a polished stone statue of an immortal god.

Eve smiled and touched his thigh lightly, letting her fingertips follow the contours of his leg muscles upward to his lower abdomen. Every muscle seemed to rise and flow beautifully as if chiseled by the loving hand of an adoring sculpture. Eve pressed her lips to his naval, tasting the saltiness of the sweat pooling in the shallow depression. Her fingertips played through the thin line of coarse black hair that trickled down from his naval to his groin. Helplessly, her eyes were drawn to his heavy member resting peacefully against his thigh. Every part of him was beautiful and to be admired.

Laying her cheek against his stomach, Eve watched her fingertips lightly rake down the line of coarse hair, her nails twirling and twisting in the slightly longer black hair at the base of his member. In his sleep, Rhonan groaned low, his hips shifted slightly to her touch. She smiled and dragged her nails gently along the length of his shaft. His body flinched and a low breath caught in his throat.

A sudden need gripping her, Eve moved lower and kissed the thick base of the muscle. Rhonan's stomach began to quiver and ripple with quick breaths. His fingers touched her hair lightly and she lifted her head, looking at his face. He gazed back at her with heavy eyes burning with love and hunger. No words left his lips but he still begged her not to stop as he thickened and hardened in an instant.

She took him in her soft hands, squeezed and stroked until his chest began to rise and fall more rapidly, his breath quickened and eyes hazy. His fingertips trembled in her hair as her warm tongue traced around the crown of his cock. A glistening droplet of clear fluid pooled in the tiny hole at the tip and Eve captured it with her tongue then slowly took possession of the full head with her lips.

"Fuck..." Rhonan gasped tight and lifted his hips a bit.

Eve took him in deeper as his breath staggered and jerked out of him. He pressed his head back into the pillows and gripped her scalp more firmly, slowly thrusting in time with her stroking mouth.

"Oh god, baby." He groaned deep, thick. "Oh Eve...you feel so good."

Taking her time, Eve savored the taste and feel of Rhonan's thickness filling her mouth and throat. Tears stung her eyes as her love for the man tingled her skin and burst through her heart. She squeezed his hard shaft with her lips and sucked up to the thick head then released him slowly.

Eve of Passion

Rhonan's strong hands gripped her arms gently but with an urgency as he drew her up to him. She straddled his waist, her moist heat pressing against his firm, hot stomach. He caressed her thighs slowly, then rubbed his hands up her sides and cupped her breasts, his thumbs sliding across her hardened nipples.

A low, uneven breath shuddered up her throat and she gripped his wrists lightly then caressed his thick, muscles forearms, the feel of his strength beneath her fingertips making her head spin. This felt like a dream. She'd never imagined a man such as this wanting her, loving her. *Only* her. So much so that he would give up everything to keep her safe, to protect her.

A tear slid down her face and Rhonan's fingertips immediately wiped it away with a tenderness she would have never believed this man could possess. Such a short while ago she'd watched him ride down the street, head high, what she perceived to be arrogance resonating out of him. She remembered despising him, his kind. And yet, when he'd swept her up on his horse...she'd experienced an inner excitement unlike anything she'd ever known before.

Rhonan pushed up on one arm and wrapped the other around her, pulling her against his thick chest. His warm lips touched her throat, working slowly, thoroughly up to her lips. "Why the tears?" he murmured against her mouth.

She flattened her hands on his handsome face and touched her brow to his. "Why me?" She whispered. "Why do you love *me*?"

A low chuckle rumbled deep inside Rhonan's heated body. His arm tightened around her, crushing her to him. "That's like asking why the rivers run toward the sea." He whispered, kissing her lip. "Why the stars shine at night." He kissed her again and laid her down on her back, covering her body with his. He kissed softly down her throat again and across the swell of her breasts. "Why sun rises in the east, sets in the west."

His lips brushed across her hard, budding nipple and he grabbed it gently, tugging lightly.

"I never knew you were such a poet." Eve moaned softly, smiling. Her fingers sank into his hair as she arched her body to him, opening her legs and curling them around his hips.

"I'm full of surprises." Rhonan murmured, his lips twisting in a smile. He grabbed at her nipple with more purpose, sucking it gently.

Eve moaned and smiled, a low breathe escaping her. "You're full of something."

Rhonan paused then raised his head, a grin stretching his lips. "Yeah? That so?"

A soft laugh fell from Eve's lips. "Yes."

Rhonan grinned and moved back up to her mouth. "Well, you're going to be full of something in about a minute." he murmured.

She laughed again and touched his face. "Tell me you're a man who makes good on his threats."

"Oh I am." Rhonan kissed her, then plunged his tongue into her mouth. Eve's arms went around his neck and tightened as he shifted his hips and pressed deeper between her thighs, his steel cock finding her wet center and pushing through without asking for permission.

Eve of Passion

"Uhhh!" Eve gasped sharp, her head tilting back and body arching more fiercely as his length and thickness shoved deeper and deeper inside her.

Dark pleasure shadowed Rhonan's eyes as he watched her face, his lips twisted in a satisfied smile. He pushed his hips forward, forcing himself further in, pulling her breath from her. Her nails gouged his back muscles, cutting at his skin, but she couldn't release her grip.

"Oh god..." Eve sucked in a sharp breath then Rhonan's mouth was crushing hers. A strong whimpering moan swelled in her throat as his hands worked beneath her and clutched her ass, his strong fingers gripping her flesh fiercely as he lifted her off the bed a bit and thrust into her with strength and force.

A hard grunt erupted from him and his forehead dropped against her neck as his fingers tightened and he came at her with more urgency, shaking the bed, causing the short wooden legs to scrape against the hard wood floor, screeching sharply.

Through her haze of desire, she found herself thankful Rhonan sent Marcus outside. Her brother was no fool, he surely knew what was taking place, but she didn't need him listening in.

Eve's thighs squeezed Rhonan's hips and her leg wrapped more tightly around him as her body responded with eagerness, giving as good as she was getting. Her hunger for the man drove him on, ignited his lust and desire. He released her ass and gripped fistfuls of the blankets, the muscles in his arms flexing, popping as he growled deep and fucked her harder.

The room began to shimmer and spin as he steadily, forcefully pulled the orgasm out of her. The wail began low in the base of her throat and swelled thicker, louder as it was slowly tore from her, the orgasm clutching and exploding.

"God!!" She screamed and sank her nails into his flesh, her teeth biting down on sweat damp muscle.
"Rhonan! Yes! *Yeeess!!*"

"That's it, girl." Rhonan gasped hard, panting fiercely, driving himself into her. "Give it to me!"

Eve screamed again and bit his shoulder once more.

"Fuck!" Rhonan's face twisted with sexual agony and shoved up with his arms, using the force of his lower body to thrust at her, without reservation. "Fuuck!! God!"

Eve gasped for air as a second orgasm surfaced swiftly. "Oh God!"

Urgency gripped Rhonan and he fucked her erratically, tearing the orgasm from deep inside her as his own peaked hard and fast.

"*Fuuuck!!*" Rhonan threw his head back and shouted loud, his body exploding, filling Eve with his heat. A fierce growl squeezed up his throat and through his clenched teeth as he emptied himself inside her, his breath hot against her damp skin, his thrusts quickened and erratic until the orgasm began to release him.

He gasped hard then dropped down on his back on the bed beside her, his chest heaving. He raked his fingers through his hair then rubbed his hands down his face and released a hard breath.

Eve's heart raced, thumping hard against her ribs. She stared at the ceiling, a small smile playing on her lips. Rhonan glanced at her then reached over and lightly fingered the damp hair clinging to her glistening brow.

Eve of Passion

She turned her head and looked at him.

"What's going to happen to us?" She asked softly. She pressed her lips together and turned her face against his hand.

"What do you mean?" He asked low, his brow pinching.

"Nero." Eve whispered and her throat squeezed. "I...I was foolish going to him."

Rhonan turned on his side and propped up on one elbow. He stared down at her and raised one eyebrow. "Yes, you were. Damn foolish. And if you ever do anything like that again, I swear I will bend you over my knee and spank your ass like a child."

Eve bit her lips between her teeth and smiled, unable to suppress it.

Rhonan chuckled. "Think I'm playing?"

"No." Eve whispered, leaning closer, kissing him softly.

"Good." He murmured. "Because I'm not. You stay away from Nero."

Nodding slowly, Eve moved closer and pressed her face against his damp chest. "What if Nero..." She faltered and licked her lips as anxiety tightened her insides. Why had she went to Nero? Had she really thought he would accept the trade? "What if Nero sends for me? To discuss...my offer?"

"You refuse to go." Rhonan said tightly. "I will deal with Nero. I'll fix this mess."

This mess. In trying to help him, she had only caused him more trouble. "I'm sorry." She whispered thickly. "I didn't mean to make a mess-"

His mouth covered hers, stealing her words. He kissed her long, deep, then drew away slowly, his fingertips on her face. "You were willing to exchange your life for mine." He murmured. "In all my time on this earth...no woman has ever showed such care for me." He kissed her again. "I will take care of it."

Eve leaned towards him, touching her lips to his. "Rhonan-"

"Eve!" Marcus burst into the room then stopped short at the sight of Eve and Rhonan laying naked on the bed, the blankets kicked away.

"Marcus!" Eve gasped sharp and grabbed for the blankets, covering herself. Rhonan just stared at the younger man, his brow tight.

"What is it, Marcus?" He asked slow, his eyes slightly narrowed as he surveyed the guy's face.

Marcus turned away, standing with his back to them. "There...uh..." He swallowed tightly. "There's someone here...asking for...Eve."

Eve frowned, uncertain. She glanced at Rhonan, a shadow of fear in her eyes. "Who is it, Marcus?"

"Two...two men." He said without looking her way. "Nero has...requested your presence."

Eve of Passion

Eve trembled and Rhonan touched her, soothing her instantly. "It's all right." He said then left the bed and grabbed for his clothes. "I said I would take care of it."

"What's going on?" Marcus asked quietly, concerned.

"Nothing I can't handle." Rhonan muttered as he dressed. He grabbed his scabbard and shoved past Marcus, leaving the room.

Marcus turned slowly, looking around cautiously. "Why is Nero requesting your presence?" He asked tightly.

Looking at her hands, Eve shook her head. "I made a mistake." She said quietly, then glanced up. "But Rhonan will deal with it."

"You tell me to stay away from Nero." Marcus said. "When all the time you've been...what? What did you do?"

"It doesn't matter." Eve insisted. "I was a fool. But I recognize that now. And I hope you recognize how foolish it is to even contemplate stepping into Nero's arena."

"I can make my own decisions." Marcus said tightly. "Despite what you or *he* thinks."

"Marcus-"

Rhonan's voice from the kitchen rose suddenly to a shout. Eve and Marcus looked quick towards the doorway. Marcus shot Eve a sharp look. "Get dressed."

He left the room and Eve found her dress, tugging it on.

The shouting intensified. Eve was shaking as she laced her dress then left the bedroom.

In the kitchen, she found Rhonan furious and on the bare edge of drawing his sword. The two men standing inside the outer door didn't appear to be gladiators, but were men of strength nonetheless.

"Nero expects her to be brought to him." One of the men spoke with defiance against Rhonan's anger, though fear shadowed his eyes.

"She is not setting foot outside this house with you." Rhonan's hand gripped the handle of his sword, squeezing. "Now you can walk out of here of your own free will...or I can throw your lifeless corpses out myself."

Eve stared wide-eyed at Rhonan, the look in his eyes, the tightness of his face testifying he was ready and willing to make good his threat.

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