

Spolia Victoris

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Spolia Victoris

by [OpalApparition](#)

Summary

“Does the *Dominus* enjoy serving a *slave*?” Ilya murmured.

Shane looked up at him through dark lashes. His mouth was a hairsbreadth away from Ilya’s cock, and Ilya could see the exact moment the last of his composure burned out, *shedding*, the way a snake left its old skin behind, eyes bright and body underneath already new—

—and instead of answering, Shane licked a stripe up the underside of his shaft, root to tip.

The law calls Ilya a slave. The mob of Rome calls him their lion, their Gladiator. Senator’s son Shane calls him to his bed.

Now Shane wants to call him *free*, but that means owning him first.

Notes

To those about to read smut, we salute you.

My sincerest thanks to [Tulipathy](#) and [RiotHag](#) for helping me with this piece!

Please check out this amazing illustration by [frozengeneeee](#)!!!!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

The Thracian died badly.

Ilya had given him every chance to go down cleanly with a disarm, a knee to the back, and a sword at his throat while the crowd screamed for the kill. But the man had scrambled for his blade again, and the *editor muneris* had turned his thumb, and so Ilya had opened him from hip to ribs and watched him fold into the sand like wet linen.

Blood on his hands. Blood up both forearms and oozing from the split in his lip.

Blood drying fast in the late afternoon heat, cracking in the creases of his knuckles.

Gilded in gore, Ilya was crimson-burnished, dripping, bare from the waist up save for the leather *manica* strapped from wrist to shoulder on his sword arm. His *subligaculum* hung low on his hips, dark with sweat and sand, and the wide *balteus* cinched at his waist was the only thing holding the loincloth in place. His shoulders burned from a bout that had gone six exchanges too long. The *ocrea* on his left shin had caught a blow that numbed his calf, and his left thigh had a shallow gash above the shin guard's rim from where the Thracian had gotten lucky early.

The lips of the wound pulled apart every time he shifted his weight, but... Ilya smiled, flicking back his hair, and raised his sword anyway.

Fifty thousand Romans lifted up their voices and screamed his name.

—or *their* version of it. Latinized and in their clumsy mouths, *Ilias*, stretched into three syllables that bore no resemblance to the way his mother had said it. He bared his teeth at them, snarling his victory, and they loved it, barking back at him, the way pack animals answer an apex predator.

Ilias! Ilias!

It sounded like a Greek hero, which was the point. Romans loved their Greeks, loved pretending the empire was a continuation of Athens instead of a military state that swallowed cultures whole and shit out marble statues. They loved *him*, the idea of him, their lion *Ilias*, and they threw tokens down to him like raindrops: wreaths and coins and bits of gold. A woman in the second tier had unlaced her stola to her navel, revealing her perfect breasts, and was shouting proposals he could only half hear over the din.

Smearing his murderous rouge across his lips to stain them first, Ilya then flicked them out towards her to blow her a kiss because it would make the crowd lose their minds, and it did.

He always knew what would make them roar for him: like removing his helmet *during* the kill rather than after so they could see his face when the sword went in. Or when he would gloat over the wounded, drawing out the miserable game he'd already won. Now, with his head bare, the late sun hit his sweat-soaked hair and the air was sweet and open on his scalp after an hour inside bronze. The helmet dangled from his left hand by its crest, swinging with

each step, and the crowd screamed louder for it: the blond hair, the grin, the blood splattered across a face pantherine they could finally see.

This was the image they would fire on their pottery and gouge into the plaster of their tavern walls.

Ilias, bare and bloodied and smiling.

He was good at this part. He had been good at this part since the first time they put a sword in a boy's hand and told him to make them love him, and he had, and they did, and none of them knew his name.

Ilias! Ilias!

The killing he could take or leave. Some days it sat heavier than others, and today the Thracian had been... young, with a fighting style that told Ilya he'd learned it in the provinces and never had a proper *doctore*—but the performance after, the strutting and the grinning at the expense of the dead boy, that cost him nothing. He'd been performing since he was fourteen years old, dragged from the wild steppes of unmapped lands beyond Scythia and Sarmatia by a chain about his neck to a *ludus* in Capua where they beat their flattened, colorless language into him.

Rome would never let him forget it, either. He could master their Latin, wear a victor's wreath, bleed for their pleasure, and he would still and forever be *barbarus*, a man from beyond the world they called civilized.

Still... it was not all bad.

Years later, the amphitheater ate from his bloodied palm. Rome loved to tell itself it had been nursed by a she-wolf, and here were fifty thousand of its people, suckling at his fingers like cubs.

He turned on his heel, slow, scanning the tiers. Senators in the *podium* fanning themselves, *equestrians* in their white tunics leaning forward with wine-flushed faces, the *plebians* packed tight in the upper decks, stamping their feet until the wooden boards shook. Ilya's gaze slid past them all, searching, until...

There you are.

In the third row of the senatorial seats was a young Roman with dark hair cut close, sitting like he had an iron rod sewn into the back of his tunic—spine straight, knees together, his talented hands folded in his lap as though he were attending a lecture on aqueduct maintenance rather than watching bloodsport. Within him was all the attenuated focus of a hunting wolf—lean-bodied, sharp-featured, patient in his predation. Where other patricians shouted themselves hoarse, he sat motionless, every sinew coiled beneath that sapid stillness.

Shane Hollandus. For now only a senator's son, but a decorated military tribune, one who would inherit half of the Esquiline Hill, and the worst liar Ilya had ever met, because every other patrician in that row was on their feet screaming and Shane was sitting perfectly still,

wearing a tunic of plain undyed linen. Ilya knew the fabric: Egyptian cotton, so fine it was nearly translucent at the collar.

It cost more than many of the slaves in the arena pits.

As a patrician, Shane wore expensive things the way lesser men wore armor: tight to the body, stately, and carefully chosen. But cost was not clamor; unlike his more fashionable peers, nothing he wore was particularly ostentatious. Instead Shane had susurrating silks and his expensive fabrics, the understated hammered gold of his signet ring with its single carved amethyst. All small, missable things to those too lazy to look, but undeniably and thoughtlessly valuable, as though wealth were not a blessing he had asked for or saw any reason to announce.

He was the son of a man who could trace his lineage back to the founding of the Republic, a man who expected Shane to carry the family name forward in step with the *cursus honorum* without a single stumble.

Or at least not any *more* public stumbles.

It had only been a short time since the Senator had married his son to the daughter of a consul and accepted the divorce six months later without public comment, because the alternative—acknowledging that his son had shown no interest in the marriage bed, that the girl had returned to her father's house still untouched—was worse.

It was a strange loophole. Shane Hollandus could fuck a gladiator in private so long as he was the one *giving*, actually being the one doing the fucking, and his father could ignore it as *using a slave*, the way everyone politely ignored half the Senate *using* their household slaves. But a *cinaedus*, a man who *received*, who opened himself to penetration, and worse, one who submitted willingly to a barbarian, uncivilized by Roman law and definition, a man Rome believed existed to be ruled... that was a different species of shame.

Rome could excuse it for as long as Shane used his body as a tool or possession that imposed his will, rather than allowing him to succumb to a will that imposed itself.

Rome did not care who a man fucked.

Rome cared who *won*.

And if who *lost* became public knowledge, no military record or family name would be enough to keep Shane on the *cursus honorum*. One bad rumor now, in this crucial time before the quaestorship, and there would be no recovery. Rome forgave men who fell after they were seated, but those who stumbled on their way to the Senate found its doors shut forever.

His father would be forced to disinherit him in the time it took to summon a notary.

Among the ruddy, sun-coarsened senators flanking him, Shane's features stood apart; the narrow set of his eyes, the clean angle of his cheekbones, coloring that owed less to Roman blood than to wherever his mother's people had come from. Esquiline gossips called her *Serican*, which meant they didn't know and hadn't bothered to learn.

Ilya didn't know either, and didn't need to. He knew what Shane looked like underneath the very fine tunic. That was geography enough for a barbarian.

They were both, despite their opposing stations, simultaneously fixtures and foreigners here in Rome.

And Shane... was watching him.

His face gave nothing away to the polished company beside him, but Ilya had spent enough nights with Shane to read what other people missed, like the *tension* in his hands where they sat so demurely in his lap, or the way he was breathing through his mouth, lips barely parted. At his current distance, Ilya could not see the teeth hidden in that mouth, but he knew them as well as all the rest.

The line of his throat worked around a swallow when Ilya met his eyes and held them.

Shane looked away first, as he always did in public.

Ilya grinned—his real grin rather than a winner's leonine snarl for show—and tipped his sword in the vague direction of the patrician seats before he let the arena attendants herd him toward the *Porta Sanavivaria*, the Gate of Life, where winners walked out. The dead Thracian would leave through the other gate, the one that led to the *spoliarium* where they stripped corpses.

He didn't look back, and did not need to, to be certain those dark eyes were tracking him once more.

Their arrangement of the last few months had its own rhythm: Ilya fought, Ilya won, and sometime between those points, Shane's money moved through the right hands, so Ilya would find himself escorted through the streets of Rome to a *domus* on the Esquiline Hill where the beds were worth speaking of (soft sheets, instead of heaps of straw), the wine was Falernian worth tasting, and a Roman patrician worth Ilya's time waited for him with a tightly-wound hunger he let no one else see.

Perhaps, Ilya thought, no one else had earned seeing that.

By the time Ilya reached the tunnel, afternoon shadows were long on the sand. He knew it would soon be evening. Behind him, the crowd was still howling *Ilias! Ilias!* and he could feel the vibration of it through the soles of his sandalled feet. At the mouth of the door, one of the handlers pressed a damp rag into his hand for the blood.

Ilya wiped his forearms and thought about Shane's mouth.

Lush and soft-lipped, with a pink tongue even more talented than his hands; were that it were here suckling the red from his skin to sup instead of this *rag*.

In the dim underbelly of the arena, the other gladiators gave him room. They always did after a kill; some from respect, some from superstition, a few from rancor that festered watching a barbarian slave earn more adoration from Roman citizens than any freeborn man in the *ludus*.

Ilya ignored them. Only now, as the performance high dropped, did his body begin to register the fight: the gash on his thigh stinging in earnest, bruises surfacing across his ribs where the Thracian had snagged him with the flat of his blade, a dull ache in his sword shoulder that would stiffen by morning.

“That last hook was sloppy.”

The voice came from behind him, accented Latin with Germanic consonants that did not soften the way Romans expected. Ilya knew him as *Marlow*, because his actual name was some unpronounceable thing, and the man leaned against the stone archway with his arms crossed, face still streaked with dust from the earlier *venatio*. He was built heavier than Ilya and ten years older; he’d been fighting in Rome since before Ilya had been captured, back when the Flavian Amphitheater was still new enough that people called it by the emperor’s name. The scar tissue laid all over Marlow’s body proved it, and it was thick enough across his knuckles that his hands looked like they’d been broken and incorrectly re-set.

Ilya shrugged. “That last hook killed him.”

“And it *almost* opened your guts when he twisted under it.” Marlow pushed off the wall and moved closer, eyes tracking the sluggish bleeding on Ilya’s thigh. “You get flashy when your Roman’s watching. Makes you stupid.”

Your Roman. Marlow had one too, though his was the rich, lonely wife of some military commander frequently posted away from his own bed. It was common for such women to take lovers, though polite society would pretend otherwise. Many gladiators within the *ludus* entertained the pretty, poorly pleased, women of the city.

So of course, Marlow assumed Ilya’s secretive patron was also of the fairer sex.

“Makes me richer,” Ilya said.

“Makes your *lanista* richer.” Marlow spat a thick glob of blood-tinged saliva onto the stone floor. “She pays your *lanista* more in a month than I’ll earn in five years of not dying, and you wait for her like a dog. You know what they call that in my country?”

“I do not care what they call it in your country.”

“*Lubō*. Love,” Marlow said, first in his own strange tongue and then in Latin, then walking away before Ilya could throw the basin at his head, and just in time for the *lanista* himself—a fat man named Drusus with oiled hair who owned Ilya the way a man owns a fine horse, with pride and profit margins—to walk in with a full accounting of the crowd’s reaction and a clay cup of *posca*, the sour vinegar-water that passed for a gladiator’s refreshment.

Ilya drank it and started unbuckling. His helmet went onto its peg first, then the *manica*, one buckle at a time, the leather stiff and slippery where blood had soaked through at the elbow. His arm underneath was red-dented, the skin grooved with strap marks that would fade by morning. His *balteus* came last; he had to dig his thumb under the buckle where the leather had swollen with sweat, and when the wide belt finally dropped, his *subligaculum* sagged loose on his muscular pelvis.

“Your *Romanus* sent word already,” Drusus said, not quite smiling. He used the word *Romanus* the way he’d say *buyer* or *client*, stripped of any implication beyond commerce. “You will go to him tonight, and you will please him, or *I* will make you curse your whore mother for ever giving birth to you. His man delivered the purse an hour before your bout even started. That’s confidence, considering that it’d be more lucrative to bet on you not surviving the bout.”

Or impatience, Ilya thought, shrugging, then wincing at the pull in his shoulder, and said nothing.

Drusus, swine that he was, didn’t need to know that the shrug covered the kick of anticipation low in his stomach. It was the same one he got before a fight, before the gates opened and the field of battle stretched wide and every nerve in his body lit up with the knowledge that what happened next mattered.

“Get the stink off yourself,” Drusus said. “His escort arrives at the second watch.”

Ilya peeled the loincloth off and kicked it toward the pile of dirtied gear. Naked, he stood under a bucket of cold water and thought about the way Shane’s hands again. *Talented* hands, he’d thought in the arena, and they were so. With all manner of scholarly writings and the holding of reins for horses and for other, infinitely more pleasurable, uses.

He shook the water from his hair and ran his palm over the gash on his thigh. Water sluiced over his shoulders, cold enough to shock, and for half a breath Ilya was somewhere else: a river outside his family’s winter camp, ice melt running fast and brutal, his father laughing while Ilya yelled about the cold. *Toughen up, boy. Winter doesn’t care if you’re comfortable*. He blinked and the memory scattered. The stone walls of the *ludus* stared back at him, indifferent.

His mother was constantly in his thoughts, but he didn’t let himself think about his father often.

A *medicus* appeared with his linen strips and vinegar, and Ilya shoved the memories down where they belonged, far under the surface, below the ice. The past was a country he couldn’t return to, and the present was Rome. He’d made peace with that.

Mostly.

The *medicus* only stayed long enough for a quick, impersonal patch job, making use of supplies and pungent tinctures that stung more than the cut itself did. It would need stitching if he wanted it to heal without a thick scar, but the *medicus* could do that later, as he’d already run off to another bleeder. Right now, the bandage served its purpose well enough, and one of the *ludus* attendants brought him a tunic.

It was the same one they always gave him for these evenings, or one identical to it: decent quality undyed wool, coarse enough to chafe where it sat on his bruised ribs, hemmed short enough the bandage showed. A slave’s garment. It smelled like the barracks: straw and old sweat and the vinegar they used to scrub the floors, but it was clean, and it was reasonably passable.

Ilya belted it with a strip of leather, and the transformation was complete. Moments ago he was a celebrity. Now he looked like any laborer heading home from a fullery. A proud laborer, perhaps, since he carried himself with his shoulders back and his head arrogantly high, despite the bandage on his leg and the split on his lip.

Even in a slave's tunic, Ilya walked like the mob was still watching. His first *doctore* in Capua had beaten it into him: *You are a performer, boy. You are a product. The moment you walk like a slave, you die like one.*

Ilya had learned the lesson well enough he couldn't remember how he'd walked before, when he was just a boy in his homeland with a hunting bow and a future that didn't involve getting cut open for the entertainment of his supposed betters.

Sometimes he tried to remember that boy and imagine what his life would have looked like if he'd grown up free.

He would be married by now, probably. A father. Herding horses across grass that went on forever, sleeping under skies where nothing had a Roman name. Speaking a language that wasn't borrowed or beaten into him.

Ilya carried that boy the way a river carried silt: invisibly, always, depositing him in unexpected places.

"Ilias!"

Ilya turned. A man jogged up, limping but still pink-faced and grinning from his own bout earlier in the afternoon. Bood. He'd won, but barely, and the fight had earned him a blackened eye and a contusion on his knee that explained the limp. He was also older than Ilya, but only by a year, maybe two, and he had the kind of face Romans liked: sharp-featured, clean-shaven, pretty enough that sponsors paid extra to have him pose at their banquets.

Bood signed his contract three years ago to pay off his father's debts, and he talked about buying his way out with an air of certainty that made Ilya want to blacken his *other* eye.

"That finish," Bood said, slightly breathless. "The crowd's still talking about it! Where did you learn to feint like that? That hook?"

"Thrace," Ilya lied, because it was easier than explaining.

Bood's grin widened. "Teach me. I've got a *murmillo* from the Ludus Dacicus next month, and if I can—"

"No."

The grin faltered. "No?"

"If you pay me, I teach you," Ilya said, already turning toward the gate where Shane's escort would be waiting. "But not for free. I am not your *doctore*."

“Right,” Bood said, recovering quickly. “Of course. I just thought—”

“You thought because we fight in the same arena, we are friends.” Ilya glanced back over his shoulder. “But we are not friends, Bood. You have a contract. I have a brand. Learn the difference.”

He left Bood standing there and didn’t feel bad about it. Bood would survive or he wouldn’t. No one in the pit, or above in the arena, cared about pretty faces or good intentions, and Ilya had already spent too much of the day keeping himself alive.

At the second watch, just as promised, two of Shane’s household guards were outside the *ludus* gate with a litter. They knew Ilya by sight and nodded to him without deference or contempt. Just paid men doing a job, which Ilya respected more than false friendliness. He climbed into the litter, pulled the curtain shut, and let himself be carried through the darkening streets of Rome while the city moved around him in its loud, drunken orbit. Ilya lay back against the cushion and let himself drift. He could smell roasting meat from the *thermopolia*, and hear the *tabernae*’s joyful but tuneless song.

Snatches of conversation floated through the litter’s curtains: arguments about whether the Thracian could have won if he’d fought defensively, whether *Ilias the Lion* was truly the best *murmillo* in the city or if it was Priscus at the *Ludus Magnus*, and Ilya let himself enjoy the idle pleasure of hearing strangers debate his talent.

He was the best. He knew he was the best.

...but it was good to hear Rome say it.

Ilya knew half of Rome wanted to fuck him. The fantasy and thrill of bedding a killer was the arena’s truest currency, and when the body was an exotic barbarian’s... Ilya understood the transaction. He’d been the object of hungry gazes since he was old enough to hold a sword, and had made his own honest effort to fuck a large portion of the interested half of Rome.

Fucking was easier work than fighting. Drusus was happy to sell him to whoever would pay, and there was little Ilya could do to decline.

Meanwhile there was Shane, wealthy and well-born enough to have anyone. And so objectively gorgeous both men and women tracked him across rooms. Ilya had watched it happen in the arena. It was sure to be worse at the public baths.

He could picture it clearly: freedmens’ gazes following Shane from the *tepidarium* to the pool, lingering on his shoulders and the muscles cording his back as he lowered himself into the water. Shane wouldn’t notice, because Shane never noticed, because Shane was too busy thinking about grain legislation or whatever it was that Roman senators’ sons filled their skulls with instead of paying attention to the way people *looked at them*.

If Ilya was free, allowed to be in those same spaces, he knew what his own response to such blatant coveting would be: he would stare at the freedmen until they all had the good sense to find another pool, or he would find one *for* them and *drown them all in it*.

Shane could walk into any bathhouse, any banquet, any room in this city and find a willing partner by sunrise. He could have, easily, a citizen. A free man with no risk of scandal, no middleman, and no bribe to be paid to a *lanista*. Instead Shane sent a litter for a barbarian who smelled like blood and *posca* and slept in a cell that locked from the outside. Week after week. Ilya had stopped counting the visits the way a man stopped counting sunrises—not because the number lost meaning, but because he had faith it would come.

Shane sent for him. Shane sent for him. Shane sent for him.

The fact of it wore a groove in Ilya's understanding of the world, a channel cut by water that would not stop running. It was maddening, because it meant Shane was choosing this—choosing *him*—and a choice could always be un-chosen. Faith could prove foolish.

The litter turned uphill, away from the noise and into the wider streets of the Esquiline, where the houses grew behind high walls and the air smelled less like sewage and more like perfumes and baking bread. Shane's *domus* announced itself by its refusal to announce itself: a plain exterior wall of good brick, an unremarkable door, a single bronze lamp hanging from a hook... typical of this boring, plain, senator's son. Shane didn't posture in his excess, his wealth simply *was*, just as Shane *was*.

Ilya was terrible at *not* posturing.

And yet Shane, rich and boring, had seen through it all from the very first night. Ilya had given him the full arsenal: many lazy grins, prowling, cocksure tilts of his head that worked on matrons and senators' wives alike... and Shane had watched everything, unimpressed, and then asked Ilya what the scar on his shoulder blade was from.

Not *how he'd gotten it in some glorious fight*, but *what weapon made that shape*.

The specificity had startled Ilya into dropping the grin, and in the gap where the performance had been, Shane had looked at him as he *was*, and not looked away.

Most Romans looked at Ilya's scars and saw spectacle; Shane looked and saw pain. He saw the bronze, the trajectory, the fact that someone had tried to hook him from behind, and what that meant about the opponent's training. He'd been *reading* Ilya the way Ilya read fighters in the arena, watching for patterns, for tells, for the gap between the performance and the man.

It made him wonder, not for the first time, what else Shane saw when he looked at him, and what had drawn him in. Not the body—Ilya knew exactly what the body did to people, had been trading on it since the first time a Roman matron threw her breast-band into the arena for him. Shane had seen the body. Shane's hands had mapped every scar and tendon and joint of the body.

What Shane saw was whatever lived underneath it, and Ilya was not entirely sure he wanted to know what that was, because it might mean Shane was smarter than him, and Ilya did not *lose*.

And... further... Ilya wondered why it was that he could no longer pretend that it was not *mutual*.

Guards led him through the vestibule, black and white mosaic under his sandals, a small fountain trickling in the atrium, and down a corridor lit by oil lamps set into wall niches. Ilya had walked this route often enough to know the house by its sounds and smells: the faint splash from the garden *impluvium*, a kitchen slave clattering pots somewhere in the back, the beeswax and olive oil scent of Shane's private rooms growing stronger as they turned left past the *tablinum*.

They passed the *tablinum* door, and Ilya glanced through it out of habit. Shane's study, where he kept his accounting tablets and correspondence and the locked cedar chest that had appeared two months ago and now lived beside the desk. Shane had deflected the one time Ilya asked about it—*documents, research, nothing interesting*—but Ilya had seen the way Shane's eyes went to that chest when he thought Ilya wasn't looking, and Ilya knew a lie when he heard one.

Whatever was in that chest mattered enough to lock away, and Shane was terrible at wanting things quietly.

The guard knocked once, opened the door, and stepped aside.

Ilya walked in.

The *cubiculum* was small. It always surprised Ilya, how small Roman bedrooms were, even rich ones. A *lectus* filled most of the room, a low wooden frame heaped with linen and bolsters, pushed against the back wall beneath a fresco of Ganymede carried aloft by Jupiter's eagle that Ilya had stared at more than once and found either ironic or prophetic depending on his mood. Instead of stone and raw plaster, every wall within was adorned with art, and the paintwork was finely done. A latticed screen on the far wall let in air from the *peristylum* garden beyond, and through it came the smell of night-blooming flowers and the wet green of whatever Shane's gardener was growing in the raised beds. The tile floor was cold—Ilya always noticed it, coming from the hot sand and the baked stone of the arena tunnels—and there was little other furniture besides the bed, the oil lamp on its iron stand, and a small wooden table holding a clay jug of oil and a ewer of wine.

Shane stood by the window, half-turned, a cup of wine in his hand that he hadn't drunk from, judging by the fact that Ilya could see the full level at the rim.

He'd changed out of the Egyptian linen and the understated gold and the public armor of his class into something more comfortable. A more casual tunic of dark red wool, loosely cut, belted with a plain cord that tied at his left hip. It was the kind of garment that cost a fraction of what he'd worn to the arena and suited him *twice* as well, with a neckline that was wide enough to show his collarbones, the hem falling to mid-thigh.

The loose cut of the tunic didn't hide much. Shane had a soldier's build under all that statecraft: wide through the shoulders, thick-armed, the kind of weight that came from years of drilling in *lorica* and hauling a *scutum* on campaign before politics swallowed him.

Ilya had seen Shane strip enough times to know that his body was not decorative. There was a density to him, a packed heaviness in his thighs and across his back, that most Romans concealed under draped wool and that Shane concealed under everything. And still... he

looked younger like this. Softer. The senator's son packed away for the evening, and whoever Shane was underneath it standing in his place, holding wine he hadn't tasted and waiting the way sea waited for the tide to return to it.

Lamplight caught the scatter of dark freckles across his nose and cheekbones, and Ilya felt the same stupid jolt he'd felt the first time he'd seen Shane up close; that horrible, visceral, uncomplicated want of two men sharing an attraction.

That was the fiction Ilya maintained, the convenient lie that let him keep his pride intact. Shane *bought* these nights, the same way he bought oil and linen and wine, and the fact that Ilya walked through the door and not in chains didn't change the fundamental equation: Drusus received coin, Ilya arrived, Shane got what he paid for.

The wine cup trembled. Shane set it down on the table with the slow, over-controlled movement.

Ilya knew that tremble.

It meant Shane had been thinking again, working himself into knots over things that didn't require thinking. Morality. Consequence. The precise legal and ethical boundaries of what they were doing, as though Roman law cared about the difference between compulsion and compliance when the person on his knees was property. Shane had asked him once, in the dark between rounds, if Ilya *wanted* to be here. The question had been so earnest, so painfully sincere, that Ilya had laughed.

You pay Drusus a fortune for my time, Domine. What does wanting have to do with it?

Shane had flinched, and Ilya had felt the flinch like a victory and a loss at the same time, and neither of them had raised the question again.

But Shane was still thinking about it. Ilya could see it in the untouched wine, the rigid set of his shoulders, the way he hadn't moved from the window even though Ilya had been standing in the doorway.

The door closed behind Ilya, and the latch clicked.

Shane looked at him, and the dignified air he'd held in the arena seats shifted, loosening in the way a belt did when unnotched, the way an exhale softened the chest. His eyes tracked down Ilya's body and stopped at the fresh gash on his thigh, the bandage already spotting through.

"You're going to bleed on my floor," Shane said, by way of greeting, his gaze dropping to the bandage on Ilya's thigh where a dark stain had started spreading through the linen.

"Your floor has had worse."

"My floor has had *nothing* worse. I keep a very clean house."

"I have bled on this floor, on those sheets, and on that wall." Ilya nodded toward the painted plaster beside the door. "The wall was your fault, since you ruined my stitches."

Shane's mouth twitched into a crooked, almost smile. "The wall was *your* fault. You're the one who—"

He stopped himself, the flush creeping up from his collarbones, and took a sip of wine that was clearly meant to look nonchalant and did not.

"Drink your wine, *Domine*. You poured it an hour ago and I doubt more than that sip has touched your lips. It will think you don't love it." Ilya leaned his shoulder against the doorframe, crossing his arms over his chest—the posture of a man who owned the room, not the man who'd been delivered to it. "Or is the Falernian not good enough? Should I tell the *tabernae* workers who cannot afford to water their vinegar that the senator's son does not enjoy his vintage?"

"Enough of that mouth of yours, gladiator," Shane said, setting his cup down and crossing the room towards him in a few long-strides.

He kissed Ilya like he'd been thinking about it for hours.

Because he *had* been, Ilya knew, sitting in those patrician seats with his hands on his knees and his real self bolted down while the arena roared around him. All that control was gone now. Shane's mouth was open and hot and tasted like Falernian wine, and his fingers dug into Ilya's hair, pulling him down into it, and when his lips dragged over the split in Ilya's lower lip Ilya hissed and Shane *licked* the cut, tongue tracing the swollen edge, chasing the taste of his violence, or maybe the purest taste of *him* at its most base form, confirming that the body under his hands was warm and breathing and *here*.

Here. Ilya had learned that word in Latin before he learned *please* or *stop* or *I surrender*. *Hic*. The word for the present tense, the word for the ground beneath your feet, the only word in any language that meant the opposite of *gone*.

Ilya grabbed him by the hips and walked him backward into the frescoed wall, favouring his injured leg.

Shane hit the plaster hard enough that the oil lamp in its niche flickered. He didn't flinch. His hands were already pulling at Ilya's tunic, yanking the coarse linen up and off, and then his palms were on Ilya's bare chest, sliding over the bruises blooming along his ribs, pressing into them like he wanted to feel what the Thracian had done to him, like the damage was part of what he'd paid for.

Maybe it was.

Ilya pinned Shane's wrists above his head with one hand and held them there, and Shane let him, letting his body go slack against the wall with a sound that came from somewhere low in his throat. Up close, Ilya could see the oil Shane had worked through his hair—nard and *something* sweet, maybe honey, and beneath it the plain soap he used on his skin. His sleeping tunic had ridden up. The cord belt was already half undone. Ilya could see the flat plane of his stomach, the jut of his hipbone, the dark trail of hair below his navel disappearing into linen that was doing nothing to hide how hard he was.

“*Enough* of my mouth, he says, and then he demands more of it. You watched me kill a man today,” Ilya said against his mouth. “And this is what you want after?”

Shane’s hips rolled forward into Ilya’s thigh. “Yes.”

Ilya bit his jaw, just below the ear, almost hard enough to leave a mark.

“Tell me what you want,” Ilya said, and let the grin bleed into his Latin the way he let it bleed into everything: lazy, indecent, a provocation dressed up as an invitation. He kept Shane’s wrists pinned above his head and shifted his weight so his thigh pressed between Shane’s legs.

“You pay well for these nights, *domine*. So use your words. That expensive education must be good for one thing. Look at me. You were Commander of men. You gave orders on campaign and soldiers obeyed, you *know* how this works.” He leaned close enough that his mouth brushed the shell of Shane’s ear. “*Speak*.”

Shane’s wrists twisted in his grip but didn’t pull free. His hips rolled against Ilya’s thigh, involuntary, a small desperate grind he couldn’t quite stop, and the flush on his face spread to his ears.

“Are we playing that game again? You know what I want.”

“I know,” Ilya agreed. “But you say it so sweetly, yes? You have been thinking of this all day. And I will not give it to you until... you... tell... me.”

Each word was punctuated by a cruel rock of his hips, grinding just enough to taunt.

“Fiend,” Shane growled, chasing the friction.

“If I displease you, send me back,” Ilya said, tilting his head to the side, relishing in the reversal of their fates, of their stations, and of the axis of control tipping once more into his favor. Ilya said, and rolled his hips forward, slow, letting Shane feel every inch of him through the linen, giving him nothing else. “There are many strong... virile... handsome men back at the *ludus*. Senator’s pretty son Shane could have whoever he wanted.”

“I want *you*, and I want *you* to fuck me.” The words came out hoarse, stripped of every senatorial affectation, and Ilya heard the cost of them in Shane’s breathing; fast and shallow, the composure cracking along its seams.

“You can ask me nicer than this, I think.”

“*Please*.” The word cracked, splintering into something shapeless and graceless. “*Please*, I need—” He caught himself, swallowed, and Ilya could see the exact syntax collapsing, a patrician’s education reduced to a single begging syllable, the breaking point, the moment a man chose to drop a shield. “*Ilya*.”

Ilya kissed him to shut him up, and because the sound of that name in this Roman’s mouth made his cock throb and his brain go white.

His name, *his* name, from a Roman mouth like that—unsoftened, un-Latinized—hit harder than any blow in the arena that had ever knocked the wind from his lungs. Shane had asked once, quietly, what his mother had called him. He'd told Shane the real pronunciation, half as a test and half as a gift he hadn't meant to give, and Shane had repeated it back once, getting the stress wrong, and then again, getting it right, and had never used the Latinized version since.

At least not in this room.

All of Rome screamed *Ilias* and it meant nothing.

One man said *Ilya* and it felt like *floating*.

Ilya let go of Shane's wrists and got both hands on the sleeping tunic, pulling it over Shane's head in one rough motion. The cord belt snagged and he tore it. Shane's breath caught and if Ilya did not know him better, he might've thought it was for the loss of the expensive fabric but... no. No.

It was because he hadn't hesitated to *destroy* it.

Secretly, the senator's son rather liked misbehaving. Ruining things.

Being ruined.

Ilya learned this about Shane over months of borrowed nights: the senator's son went pliant the instant Ilya put real strength behind his hands, using the same grip he would use to wrench an opponent's shield aside, the force he put behind a hold when a man was trying to kill him. The first time Ilya pinned both of Shane's wrists in one hand and *squeezed*, Shane made a sound that Ilya had never heard from him before and came within minutes. Afterward, Shane had rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling with the stunned, blissed-out look of a man who had discovered a door in a wall he'd been pushing against his whole life.

He had never once asked Ilya to be softer. He asked, in small ways and with flushed ears, for the *opposite*.

So when Ilya tore a sleeping tunic once, the fabric parting with a dry rip along the shoulder seam, and Shane's breath hitched and his hips jerked forward, Ilya noted it, and filed it alongside the wrist-pinning and the hair-pulling and the way Shane went liquid and wordless whenever Ilya picked him up and moved him bodily from one surface to another. The senator's son got hard for *ruin*; his own expensive things, destroyed.

His own body, used roughly.

Later, Ilya would make him beg to be held down. He'd make him ask for it in Ilya's own language, until Shane was babbling translations he'd learned specifically for this, for pleading to be fucked hard enough to feel it tomorrow.

Shane was naked against the wall, and Ilya still half-dressed, the coarse linen of his tunic rough against Shane's bare stomach where their bodies pressed together. This was what Ilya wanted—not the wine-pinked senator's son in his dining room making small talk about grain imports, but *this*: Shane stripped of every civilized layer, Shane who didn't flinch beneath his hands. The arena was gone from his skin thanks to the rudimentary shower he'd been allowed and the fact that Shane liked him *clean*, but it lived in the bruises already darkening along his ribs, in the stiff pull of the bandage on his thigh, in the split in his lower lip that Shane kept kissing as though he could taste the afternoon through it. Clean skin over a beaten body. All of Shane's wealth pressed against the proof that Ilya could be bought for an evening but not kept whole.

He wrapped his hand around Shane's cock, and Shane's head dropped back against the wall with a dull thud.

Romans fucked like they conquered: clean, organized, the efficient transfer of dominance. Ilya's people fucked like they fought: hard and fast, teeth and nails, taking what you wanted because the world didn't give you anything soft. Shane had probably expected the first when he'd bought a barbarian gladiator.

He'd gotten the second. And now he couldn't stop coming back for it.

Neither of them were much for preamble; Ilya stroked him rough and fast, the way he'd learned Shane needed it in the beginning of things. It wasn't the slow tease that he knew, he *knew*, Shane would blush and beg for later, but rather the urgent first round that burned off the worst of the want so they could both think straight enough for what came after. His grip was tight and his rhythm was punishing, and Shane was already falling apart, hips stuttering into Ilya's fist, fingers clawing at Ilya's shoulders, his back, the bandage on his thigh—

"*Nyet*," Ilya said—*no*—before catching himself and switching to Latin. Ilya snatched Shane's wrist before his fingers could press the wound. "That one's fresh." His mother's language came out when he wasn't thinking, and he wasn't thinking now, with Shane's hands all over him and want making him stupid.

Shane pulled his hand back like he'd touched a brazier. His eyes dropped to the bandage and Ilya saw it again, that look—cataloging, counting—and he turned Shane's face back to him with two fingers under his chin.

"Eyes on me," Ilya said. "Not on that."

Shane swallowed and nodded; Ilya hardened his grip and twisted his wrist on the upstroke and Shane broke, coming hot over Ilya's knuckles with his mouth open and Ilya's name on his lips, and Ilya held him through it, his other arm braced against the wall beside Shane's head while Shane shuddered and gasped and went boneless.

Ilya was still hard. The ache of it was a low, steady throb, and he let Shane feel it, pressing his hips forward so his cock dragged against Shane's bare thigh through the linen of his *subligaculum*. Shane's hand came down between them, unsteady, reaching for him.

Ilya took his wrist again. "Not yet."

Shane could have him whipped for refusing, but instead he only blinked up at him, hazy, lips plush and slick. Wrecked and still trying to give, always trying to give, this infuriating, obstinate Roman who had never been denied a single thing in his life and did not know how to stop offering. Ilya wanted to ruin him for it. Wanted to pin both wrists and fuck into his fist and come on Shane's stomach and watch him lie there marked and furious and desperate for more.

"Let me—"

"No, I said not yet," Ilya repeated, and kissed him, slower this time, tasting wine and salt and the copper edge of his own split lip. "Take me to bed first, *Domine*."

Humming, Shane did just that, pulling him to the *lectus*, the wide low bed pushed against the far wall, draped in linen so white it nearly glowed in the firelights from each lamp. They fell onto it together, Shane on his back, Ilya loomed over him on his elbows, and the urgency of the first round had burned down to coals, still hot and still dangerous, but slower now, smouldering into bone.

Shane's hands moved over Ilya's body the way they always did in these breathing spaces between rounds: tracing the topography of damage, mapping every new mark against the catalog of older ones. He traced the jagged white line across Ilya's ribs, his thumb measuring the width of the entry point. It was a spear-glance, shallow but sloppy. A half-inch deeper and it would have found the lung. Shane's eyes narrowed as he moved to the newer bruising on Ilya's shoulder, calculating the force of the blow that had left such a deep, indigo mark. He looked at Ilya's body the way he searched maps of the Subura: looking for the bottlenecks, the weaknesses, the ways in.

He was always *searching*. Ilya had noticed it from the first night: the way Shane's hands memorized his injuries with the same focus a clerk brought to a ledger, as though if he could catalog every wound he could eventually calculate the sum of what the arena had taken and what remained.

"I... do not like that you took risks today," Shane said, echoing his earlier sentiment.

"You would like it less if I did not win," Ilya said, because it was the only answer that mattered in the arena, and even though Shane's, his *patron's*, worry sat in his mouth like a word he wouldn't say, Ilya could taste it anyway. He could always taste it, in the way Shane's fingers lingered on the oldest scars, the ones that had healed thick and white and proved that the fights before this one had also been survived. "Do you not enjoy my bouts? Are you not entertained from your special seats?"

"I was *not* entertained when the Thracian struck your leg, no."

He leaned back, the muscles in his chest cording. "Hush. Is just a cut. I win, you pay Drusus, I come here so you can look at me with your sad, rich eyes. Stop thinking so hard. Is boring."

Shane's thumb traced the hooked line across Ilya's shoulder blade. The *secutor's* net-weight, from his second year. The scar that had started all of this, four months ago, when Shane's hands had shaken and Ilya had put them back.

They were not shaking now. Whatever tremor lived inside Shane—and Ilya suspected it was deep, wound tight as catgut around everything the man did—he'd learned to bury it here, in this room, in this bed.

“No, you may not lose, I forbid it.” Shane said, and his mouth was already moving down Ilya's chest before the next sentence began. “And... since you did win, despite the risk, I want to give you your reward.”

“The Dominus is most generous,” Ilya let himself be pushed onto his back.

It was a concession he'd never make anywhere else: the arena, the *ludus*, the training yard, any ground where lying down meant losing. Here, with Shane's mouth trailing fire down his sternum, over the bruised ribs he kissed without pressing, along the flat plane of his stomach where the muscles contracted under Shane's lips, Ilya let himself be laid out.

Shane slid off the bed and knelt on the tile floor between Ilya's legs. The tile was cold—Ilya could see it in the flinch of Shane's knees as they hit the floor—but Shane didn't shift nor did he reach for a cushion.

A senator's son on his knees. On tile colder than any stone Ilya had bled on, and for all the arenas between Capua and Rome, all the grit-scoured floors he'd been forced down upon, not one had made a temple of the kneeling. And there was Shane, suppliant and muse of dark hair, darker eyes, with freckles smattered across his nose, kiss-slickened parted lips.

Ilya looked down at him and *burned*.

I have knelt on grit and on stone and on the killing floor of every ludus from Capua to Rome, and not once did it feel like worship. You kneel once on your own bedroom, and...

He shook the thought away. Shane *owned* Ilya, or near enough, apart from his *lanista*, Drusus. This arrangement ran through Drusus, and the money flowed one way: from Shane's purse to the *lanista*'s coffers, and Ilya was the commodity being rented.

On paper, in law, in every way that Rome understood, Shane held power and Ilya held none.

And here was Shane kneeling so sweetly, pulling Ilya's *subligaculum* down his thighs with both hands, pressing his mouth to the crease of Ilya's hip, breathing him in. The reverence in it—the naked, undisguised hunger—made Ilya's cock twitch against his stomach, already leaking and eager.

“Does the *Dominus* enjoy serving a *servus*?” Ilya murmured.

Shane looked up at him through dark lashes. His mouth was a hairsbreadth away from Ilya's cock, and Ilya could see the exact moment the last of his composure burned out, *shedding*, the way a snake left its old skin behind, eyes bright and body underneath already new—

—and instead of answering, Shane licked a stripe up the underside of his shaft, root to tip, and Ilya's entire body went to flames. His hand found Shane's hair, grabbing there even

though the dark strands were cropped short enough that there wasn't much to grip, but just enough to guide and set the pace, and Shane opened his mouth and took him in.

All at once there was wet heat. The flat of Shane's tongue pressing the underside, a scrape of teeth corrected before Ilya could flinch. Then Shane swallowed around him and Ilya's hips left the bed.

Shane shoved them back down.

The strength in those hands! Ilya had forgotten, and kept forgetting. This was not the soft grip of a patrician who had never held anything heavier than a stylus.

Shane had served two campaigns on the Rhine, had earned his military tribunate the hard way while lesser men bought theirs, and Ilya had spent long hours in this bed imagining Shane in legionary armor, barking orders at men twice his age, the same steady hands now wrapped around Ilya's thighs once used to brace a scutum against a Germanic charge. Shane would have been terrifying on a battlefield. He was svelte and strong, every plane of his body hardened with strength that came from hauling a legionary's shield on a forced march, not from the *palaestra*, and now he used that strength to pin a gladiator's thighs to a mattress, and the grip did not give.

He would have been beautiful in the arena; men like Shane weren't *allowed* to fight in the arena, which was Rome's way of hoarding its own: the best fighters it produced were kept for war, and the *amphitheatrum* was left to foreigners and slaves.

And it was also why no one else would see him like *this*. Shane Hollandus did not perform for crowds.

He performed for Ilya, kneeling for his use and pleasure alone.

Shane's hands slid up Ilya's thighs; gripping, fingers pressing into the dense muscle with the focused greed of a man testing the haunches of a warhorse at auction. His thumbs dug into the grooves where tendon met bone, tracing the architecture of a body built to kill at close range, and Ilya could feel him cataloging every cord and striation beneath his palms, mapping the strength that lived there the way he'd mapped enemy positions on the Rhine. Shane's hands had done this from the first night: sought out the thickest muscle groups, the most dangerous ones, the shoulders and the thighs and the forearm that swung a *gladius* for a living.

He touched Ilya the way a man touched a loaded siege weapon, with full knowledge of what it could do, and the private, heated thrill of standing in front of it anyway.

Shane wanted Ilya to stop being gentle. He had never said it outright—in any language, in any light—but his hands said it for him every time they found the places where Ilya's body was most capable of damage, and *pressed*.

So Ilya gave him what those hands were asking for. He fisted Shane's hair, the dark strands too short for a real grip, but enough to hold, enough to *steer*, and pulled Shane's head back until his throat was bared and his mouth fell open and his eyes went wide and fixed on Ilya's

face with an intensity that belonged on a battlefield. That belonged in the arena, from a man who had decided to die standing.

“Open,” Ilya said.

Shane opened.

Ilya fed his cock past those pink, patrician lips and watched Shane’s lips stretch around the thickness of him, watched the tendons in Shane’s neck cord as he took it, watched his nostrils flare on a sharp inhale through his nose because his mouth was too full to breathe through. Shane’s hands clamped hard on Ilya’s thighs, fingers biting deep enough to bruise, and Ilya let him hold on while he rocked his hips forward and slid deeper.

Shane gagged, eyes watering, and swallowed around the intrusion instead of outright gagging, throat working, fingers digging harder into Ilya’s thighs, eyes fluttering shut, and a whine crawled up out of him, vibrating through Ilya’s cock, settling at the base of his spine. Dark eyes went half-lidded and glassy, looking up at him as if to say *finally*.

As though this were what he’d been sitting in those arena seats all afternoon waiting for. The private arena. The one fight he was allowed to lose.

Ilya set the pace now, one hand in Shane’s hair, the other propped against the bed behind him, and fucked the wet ‘O’ of Shane’s mouth in long, unhurried strokes that let Shane feel every inch. Shane took it, took all of it, his technique imperfect and his eagerness doing what skill didn’t, and every time Ilya’s cock hit the back of his throat Shane made that sound again: the low, wrecked, *grateful* moan that said *more, harder, don’t you dare stop*. His hands never left Ilya’s thighs. His grip never loosened. He held onto Ilya’s body the way a drowning man held onto the hull of a ship, in full knowledge that letting go meant being swept into open water, where all else was sea, and maybe this room and this act were the only solid ground Shane had, the one place where the senator’s son could stop swimming and let the current take him.

Ilya looked down at him and thought: *You kneel better than you sit in those seats, and you sit in those seats better than any Roman I have ever watched do anything.*

He tightened his grip in Shane’s hair and Shane whimpered, the sound jerked from somewhere Shane didn’t have enough of himself left to defend, and Ilya felt the vibration of it along the full length of his cock and his hips stuttered, rhythm threatening to crack, because nobody in Rome or outside of it had ever made that sound for him.

The matrons and the senators’ wives who threw tokens at him in the arena and screamed his name wanted the fantasy of the brute, the barbarian who held them down and gave them a story to tell at the baths. They wanted the performance. Shane wanted the hand in his hair and the ache in his throat and the spit running down his chin, and he wanted it from a man who could pin him to the floor without trying, and the distance between those two desires was the distance between Rome and every place Rome had burned down.

Shane’s neglected cock hung swollen between his thighs, the tip glossed and dripping, and his hips ground slow half-circles against nothing; a mill-wheel turning without grain, the motion of a body that had forgotten idleness and could not remember how to be still, and... if

this servicing wasn't reward enough, the sight of him now, debauched as he was, surely picked up any slack:

Pinked lips stretched around him, cheeks hollowed, dark eyes shut in concentration. A strand of saliva glittered as Shane pulled off to breathe and Ilya saw his own cock, slick and blushing dark, and Shane's kissable mouth.

Ilya pulled him off by the roots of his hair—not gently—and then *held* him there, Shane's lips an inch from his cock, a strand of spit still linking them, and the sight was so obscene and so holy that Ilya could not have told a priest where one ended and the other began.

He thought, irrationally, of temples. Of the offering bowls set out before statues of gods who could not taste what was given to them. Of the futility of worship directed at marble, and the devastating sufficiency of worship directed at a living throat. Shane swallowed and looked up at him, and Ilya's whole theology rearranged itself around the wet shine of his mouth.

Shane's breath came in hot little gusts against the wet head of him, and his eyes were half-closed and his lips were ruined and he was the most beautiful thing Ilya had seen in Rome, and Rome was full of the world's loveliest temples.

"Open your mouth," Ilya said. And then: "Wider, *Domine*."

Shane obeyed, and Ilya spat into it.

The sound Shane made was guttural and involuntary, his whole body shuddering, his cock jerking hard between his thighs, and Ilya admired as he swallowed, watching the muscles of his throat work, watched the flush darken from pink to a mottled red that spread beneath his collarbones.

The Senate would burn you alive for this. Your father would drown himself in the Tiber. And you swallowed it like wine.

"*Domine*," Ilya said, soft with mockery. "You look better on your knees than you ever do in the arena seats. Is this how you will look in the senate? Or is this reward mine alone?"

Dark eyes snapped up, and the flush on his face deepened. He took Ilya back into his mouth without breaking eye contact, and Ilya felt the back of Shane's throat and had to grip the linen hard enough that his knuckles ached to keep from thrusting.

Shane hummed around him, a vibration Ilya felt in his spine, and hollowed his cheeks and *sucked*, and Ilya's vision went white at the edges. He was close, too close, his thighs trembling with the effort of not driving into Shane's mouth, and he wanted to come down that beautiful throat, but he wanted the rest of this *more*.

He pulled Shane off by the hair. Shane resisted, chasing him, mouth open and wet and obscene, and the sound he made when Ilya's cock slipped free was wrecked enough to make Ilya's stomach clench.

"Back on the bed," Ilya said. "On your stomach."

Shane climbed onto the *lectus* and lay on his stomach, arms folded under his head, and Ilya took a moment to look at him: the long line of his spine, the venus-like dimples at the base of his back, the way his shoulders were already tense with anticipation.

Ilya retrieved the oil from the small table beside the bed—he knew which table, which shelf, the way he knew the route through Shane’s house by sound and smell alone—olive oil infused with roses, because this was the Esquiline Hill and even fucking required its own perfume. He poured it over his fingers and let it warm.

Shane lay waiting, and Ilya *let* him wait, taking the time just to look over him, slowly, the way he hadn’t when Shane first turned over, because the first glance had been hunger and this one was *greed*.

Lamplight ran down the long channel of Shane’s spine, pooling in those dimples at the base of his back, catching the faint sheen of sweat still cooling between his shoulder blades. His thighs were parted. His cock hung hard and flushed between his legs, trapped against the linen, and his shoulders were taut with the effort of holding still, *knowing* he was being appraised and letting himself be still for it just the same. Shane, who kept his body under such rigid discipline that Ilya sometimes wondered whether the man had ever sprawled in his life, who wore his posture cinched as tight as his belt, was lying face-down and bare in his own bed with his legs open and oil warming on Ilya’s fingers and he was staying there. Choosing it. A man who controlled everything he could reach, surrendering control to the one that only existed to be owned by others.

Ilya had won fights that gave him less satisfaction than this.

Shane turned his head, watching him over his shoulder, and Ilya noted the flush crawling up the back of his neck, embarrassment and arousal braided so tight together that Shane probably couldn’t tell them apart anymore.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Shane said, “and put your hands on me.”

Ilya grinned. “Like what?”

“Like you’re deciding what to do with me.”

“Domine. *Tsk*. I already know what I am going to do with you.” Ilya pressed his clean hand flat against the small of Shane’s back and felt the muscles jump under his palm. “I am enjoying the part before.”

Shane’s hips pushed back, a fractional, involuntary roll against the linen, and the sound he made was bitten off and furious, directed more at himself than at Ilya, because Shane hated wanting this badly and Ilya loved that he wanted it anyway.

Ilya worked him open the way he’d learned to: by small fractions, by the timekeeping of Shane’s breathing, by the shift of muscle under his palm where his free hand held Shane’s hip. One finger, slow, and Shane’s exhale was long and frayed at the edges. The oil was warm and slick and Ilya felt the heat of Shane’s body through it; him yielding in that grudging,

gorgeous way, the resistance giving ground first in the deep muscles, then the shallow ones, his whole body consenting to Ilya one layer at a time.

And this, too, was a spoil. A reward. Shane, who once commanded legions, who had never in his life surrendered a position he could hold, opening for Ilya's fingers in his own bed with his face pressed to his own forearms and his cock dripping on his own linen.

Two fingers. Shane rocked back onto them and Ilya let him, allowing him to set the rhythm for a few strokes before curling his fingers and finding the spot that made Shane's entire body seize.

"There—Gods—"

"No gods in this room, *Domine*," Ilya said. "Only me."

Shane laughed, breathless, and the sound fractured into a groan when Ilya added a third finger and stretched him wider. That laugh though, stayed with him. It lived in Ilya's ear the way a hymn lived in the walls of the temple that housed it, vibrating in the architecture long after the singer had gone. Shane's laughter during sex was the rarest of his currencies, rarer than all other sounds, because it meant Shane had forgotten to perform or act his role, and was here, was only here, with Ilya's pressing inside him and his face buried in his own arms and his whole rigid life softened to the width of this bed.

Ilya watched his own hand disappearing into Shane's body, the oil gleaming on Shane's skin, and thought about the fact that hours ago he had killed a man in front of fifty thousand people and still the most powerful thing he'd done all day was make this Roman, this *Patrician*, come apart with three fingers.

Spreading his fingers once more, Shane's hole clenched and fluttered around the stretch, pink and oil-slick and swollen from use, the muscle gripping his knuckles on every stroke. Shane's body fought him and welcomed him in the same breath; resistance and hunger, the tight ring of muscle yielding another fraction with each slow scissor of Ilya's fingers. Ilya could hear it: the wet, obscene sound of oil and flesh, the slick give each time he pressed deeper, and beneath it Shane's breathing, ragged and open-mouthed against his own forearms.

"I love how wet you get for me, *Domine*," Ilya breathed, noting how much Shane was leaking onto the linen beneath him now, his cock twitching each time Ilya's fingers curled. Shane was close. Ilya could read it in the the shiver eating through his inner thighs, in the tendons of his neck strung taut as lyre-wire, in the frantic, stuttering roll of his hips. His body was begging even if his mouth wouldn't.

Ilya pulled his fingers out, and Shane's hole clenched on nothing, pink and puffy and glistening, open enough that Ilya could see the sheen of oil inside him, and the sight hit Ilya low in the gut like a fist. Shane, who was hard once more and aching, made a sound that belonged in the arena—an animal sound, a dying sound—and his hips bucked backward into empty air.

"No," Ilya said. "Not yet."

“Ilya—”

“You will come on my cock or you will not come at all.” Ilya wiped his slick fingers across the inside of Shane’s thigh, a long smear of oil and Shane’s own precome, and felt the muscle jump and twitch beneath his hand. “That is my price tonight, *Domine*. Your gladiator won you a very good fight today. Fifty thousand people watched me kill for your entertainment. So you will take what I give you and you will come *when* I decide you’ve earned it.”

Shane’s shoulders were shaking. His forehead pressed hard into his forearms and Ilya could see the tendons standing out in his neck, could see his fingers bloodless and cramped in the linen. His cock hung between his thighs, twitching, a bead of precome stringing down toward the wet patch he’d already made on the bed.

“You could beg,” Ilya offered.

“I already did.”

“You could beg again then, *Domine*. I liked it.”

“*Scelus.*”

Menace.

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, and he waited patiently for Shane to realize that there would be no way forward but this.

Shane, fortunately, was too far gone to be stubborn.

“*Please*, Ilya, I need—I need you inside me, I cannot—” His hips were still working in small, abortive rolls, his body chasing a fullness that wasn’t there anymore, and a wet, hitching sound came from behind his folded arms, and Ilya realized Shane was crying. Not sobbing—not yet—but his breathing had gone liquid at the edges, his ribs heaving with the effort of holding himself together and failing.

Ilya’s cock throbbed. He was a terrible person and he did not care.

“Beautiful,” Ilya murmured, running his fingers down the notches of Shane’s spine. And normally... he would tease him further, but his own want was a growing pyre, threatening to burn them both to ash. Ilya slicked himself and pressed the blunt crown of his cock to Shane’s rim.

He waited, letting Shane feel the width of what was coming, what was always first *too much* and then later *never enough*.

Shane’s thighs drew up. His fingers found the bolster above his head and locked there, knuckles white as stripped bone.

“Breathe,” Ilya said, and pushed inside in one long, steady stroke, bottoming out and holding still, savoring the slick heat crushing down on his cock as Shane’s back arched off the bed. A raw, ragged sound tore from his mouth, punched from his lungs by the intrusion, and his

hands fisted the linen hard enough that Ilya heard the fabric strain. Ilya buried himself to the hilt and held there, feeling Shane's body clench and spasm around the full length of him, the tight heat almost unbearable, Shane's hole gripping the base of his cock in a vice.

He waited, letting Shane feel it: the fullness, the stretch, the specific ache of being split open by a man whose body was built to break things. Shane's breathing had gone shallow and fast, his ribs expanding under the hand Ilya had pinned on the small of his back, and Ilya could feel his heartbeat through the walls of his body; a frantic, animal thudding. He felt Shane's heart slamming, the rapid thump thump thump of it inside his chest. Or maybe that was his own heart, transmitted through the place where they were joined, sent back to him changed. The whole of Shane's body was clenched and shaking and *holding him inside*, and Ilya pressed his mouth between Shane's shoulder blades and breathed against the knobs of his spine and understood, with the stupid clarity of a man buried to the hilt in someone he should never have touched, that he would go back to the *ludus* at dawn and fight the Gaul or anyone else Drusus named, and win, and keep winning, because Shane was on the other side of every victory.

"Move," Shane said into the bedding. "*Move.*"

Ilya pulled back until only the head remained inside, the slick drag pulling a guttural sound from both of them, and then snapped his hips forward and buried himself again.

Shane shouted.

The rhythm Ilya set was mean and slow; long, punishing strokes that let Shane feel every inch on the drag out and every inch on the drive back in, the lewd loud sound of oil and skin filling the cubiculum with each thrust. The slap of Ilya's hips against Shane's ass echoed off the painted walls, a loud, percussive beat that the household could absolutely hear through the cedar door, and Ilya didn't slow down. Ilya gripped his hips with both hands and felt the muscle and bone under his palms and drove into him with every ounce of the arena still burning in his blood, every scrap of adrenaline he hadn't spent on the Thracian.

The gash on his thigh had opened again; he could feel the slick thickness of it trickling beneath the bandage, indistinguishable from sweat, and he did not care.

He was dizzy with the feeling of it. It was like fucking a prince, a *king*, in his own throneroom. Ilya was heady with the squelching give of Shane's body around his cock each time he drove forward, the oil making everything wet and filthy and loud enough to carry through the walls of the *cubiculum* and into the corridor beyond. Ilya wanted the house to hear it, he wanted the slaves in the corridor to count every stroke by sound alone, for Shane's *ostiarius* to hear his master being taken apart. Maybe the whispers would start in the kitchen, spread to the street, filter up through the bathhouses where Shane's father's friends gathered. Ilya had watched Shane's hands shake the first time he'd summoned him and watched him drink two cups of wine before he could meet Ilya's eyes.

The fear was still there, buried under want—that one of those slaves would talk to the wrong person, that Shane's father would hear how his son took his pleasure, and on his *knees* at that.

The Senator, Shane's father, could have him killed for this.

Shane was falling to pieces beneath him. Soft, wrecked sounds were ripped from his throat with each thrust—stifled groans and half-swallowed pleas and, when Ilya angled his hips and found that spot again, a high, cracked keen that didn't sound like any noise a senator's son should be capable of making. His cock was dripping steadily, neglected between his legs, his hips making small helpless rolls each time Ilya drove deep, his body chasing friction against the sheets because his hands were too busy gripping the bolster above his head to reach for himself.

Ilya braced one hand beside Shane's head and wrapped the other around his hip, hauling Shane's ass higher, changing the angle so his cock drove deeper, and Shane's whole body spasmed and a sob left his mouth, a real sob that was wrecked and grateful.

"There, *Domine*," Ilya said, and hit the same spot again, and Shane's face dropped to the linen and his teeth sank into the bolster and Ilya could hear him moaning through the fabric, muffled and desperate. "Is that what you wanted?"

Shane nodded into the bolster, a frantic jerk of his head, and Ilya slowed his hips to a grinding roll that kept him buried deep but gave Shane nothing to thrust back against. Shane made a sound like he'd been stabbed.

"I did not hear an answer, *Domine*," Ilya said. His thigh burned where the kneeling pulled the wound's edges apart, and he ignored it the way he ignored pain in the arena: by having a reason not to stop.

"Yes," Shane gasped, the word half-eaten by linen. "Yes, that's what I—"

"Then you will thank me for it." Ilya held still, fully seated, and felt Shane's body clench around him in protest; a desperate, involuntary squeeze that said *move* in the oldest language. "Your senators teach you to thank the gods for every harvest and every victory, yes? Even when the harvest was grown by slaves and the victory won by foreign swords?" He leaned down, his chest pressing against the sweat-slick plane of Shane's back, his mouth brushing the shell of Shane's ear. "So. Thank the foreign sword."

Shane's breathing came in short, hitching bursts. His fingers had gone white in the linen.

"I am waiting, *Domine*. Or I can stop. I can get dressed and walk back to the *ludus* and you can finish yourself on your own fingers, and we both know they are not enough. Not anymore."

To prove his point, Ilya stopped thrusting, holding himself there buried to the hilt, and listened to Shane try to breathe around the intrusion. Shane's hands were fisted so hard in the linen, and his back heaved, and the wet sound from the fingering had followed him here, not crying yet, but close to it, balanced on a knife point, his body coring itself open around Ilya and his pride trying to contain the wreckage. Ilya could feel the war in his body: the need to move, to chase the orgasm Ilya was holding hostage, fighting against the pride of a man whose family name was carved into the base of a column in the Forum.

"Tell me who is inside you right now," Ilya said, and rolled his hips just once, a shallow grind that dragged across the spot inside him.

Shane keened. His head dropped between his shoulders.

“Tell me, *Domine*. Who is fucking the senator’s son in his own bed? A citizen? A freedman?” Another shallow thrust. Shane’s back bowed. “A *barbarus*? A slave who kills for sport and comes to you smelling of blood and glory?”

“You know who you are,” Shane managed, his Latin ragged.

“I want to hear you say it. I want to hear the man who sits in the high born seats of the *amphitheatrum* tell me what he really came for.” Ilya pulled back slowly, agonizingly, until only the head of his cock held Shane open, and then held there, and Shane’s whole body strained backward, trying to take him again, and Ilya didn’t let him. “Say it, *Domine*.”

“*My gladiator*.” The words ripped out of Shane on a broken exhale. “You are my gladiator and I—” Words failed him entirely after that, and the rest came out in a gasp, shapeless, and Ilya drove back in to the root and Shane screamed into the bolster, and tears streaked from the corner of his visible eye, tracing a bright line down the rouged plane of his cheek.

Ilya fucked him through it. He didn’t slow down to let Shane recover. He set a pace that was punishing—deep, angled, every stroke designed to hit the spot that made Shane’s whole body lock up—and Shane took it, weeping, his cock bouncing hard against his belly with each impact, precome smearing his skin. The tears weren’t grief. They were the overflow of a body that had been denied too long and filled too fast, a nervous system shorting out because Shane’s capacity for thinking or rebuttal had been used up somewhere between the second finger and the first thrust, and now there was nowhere left for the sensation to go except out through his eyes.

Ilya bent low over his back and licked the tear track off his cheek.

Shane sobbed.

“There you are,” Ilya murmured against his skin. “There is my *Domine*. Now. Shouldn’t you be thanking me?”

“Thank you,” Shane said, and his Latin splintered on both syllables. “*Gratias tibi ago*—is that enough for you, you insufferable—”

“For what? Tell me what you are thanking me for.”

“Thank you! F-for your *cock*, gladiator.” His hips pushed back against the hand pinning him, and Ilya let them, because the answer was better than anything he’d been fishing for. “Thank you for your cock, for fucking me, for ruining me for all others.” Shane’s breathing fractured. “And if you do not *keep fucking me* I will have you sold to the mines and buy a *Gaul*.”

There it is, there you are, the real one, the one underneath all that marble.

Ilya could feel his own orgasm coiling at the base of his spine, a white-hot pressure building, but he held it back because he wasn’t done with him yet. He pulled Shane’s hips back to meet each thrust, and the sound of it filled the room: the slap of skin against skin, Shane’s muffled

noises, and beneath it all, babbled fragments that might have been prayers or curses or both, none of them properly conjugated, and underneath it all, half-swallowed, barely audible:

“—please, oh please, please let me—Ilya, you must let me keep you, let me—”

Ilya’s rhythm broke. The words snagged in his ear, too close to meaning, too close to what lay beneath the surface of every night Shane summoned him. *Keep you*. As if Ilya were a hunting dog. A favorite horse. But Shane’s body clenched around him and his own rhythm stuttered and the words dissolved into a moan and Ilya couldn’t be sure he’d heard them at all.

His hips slammed forward on reflex and Shane cried out and Ilya thought he should stop, should slow down, should make Shane say it again so he could hear it properly, but his body wouldn’t listen. His body heard *keep you* and took it as permission to wreck them both.

Ilya supported his weight on one forearm and twisted his hand through Shane’s hair—that dark crop he could almost close his fist around—and, *pulled*, wrenched Shane’s head sideways. The long throat bared itself. Sweat in the hollow of the nape, tendons drawn fine beneath the skin, and something atavistic flickered through Ilya’s brain: *conquered*.

Ilya’s mouth flooded.

He set his teeth to the knob of vertebrae where neck met shoulder, the place a lion seized its rival by the scruff, and bit, and held, and thought nothing at all. His jaw knew this. His teeth had always known where Shane was softest: at the nape, at the throat, at the juncture of pride and surrender where the spine said mine whether the mouth did or not.

You could not keep me if you tried. You could not lose me if you tried.

You cannot keep what already keeps you.

He drove in deep and angled his hips, and every time Ilya’s cock slid into that patrician body he felt it: the vertigo of power going directions it wasn’t supposed to go.

You have never once summoned me to this house, Domine.

Ilya’s brain, the unhelpful part that never stopped running its mouth even when the rest of him was occupied, supplied: *I walk through your door because I choose to walk through your door, and if you put a rudis in my hand tomorrow I would walk through it again, free, and drop to my knees in your vestibule, and the only thing that would change is that you could no longer pretend you do not know why.*

He didn’t say any of this, but the truth remained.

He *owned* Shane in this room.

And Shane reveled in it, having gone rigid, a strangled sound punching from his lungs, his entire body locking up in instinctive submission. Ilya held him there, teeth embedded in that vulnerable nape, hips driving relentlessly, and Shane *shook*, his hands fisting the linen, his back bowed, every muscle taut as a bowstring.

Tipping his head with a snarl, greedily bent over Shane's back, Ilya bit him again, scruffing him and marking yet more of the back of his neck, bruising the junction of his neck and shoulder, and at the same time. Ilya wrapped one hand around Shane's cock and Shane's whole body jackknifed, a convulsion, his shoulders coming off the bed before Ilya's weight drove him back down.

He was so hard it had to hurt, the shaft slick with precome from root to tip, and when Ilya's fist closed around him Shane made a sound that wasn't language in any tongue. High and broken and desperate, his hips snapping forward into Ilya's grip and then back onto Ilya's cock, trapped between two kinds of fullness, unable to escape either one.

"Come for me," Ilya growled, or maybe he begged, releasing his neck only to watch the livid imprint of his teeth bloom red against Shane's skin. "Come for your *servus*, *Domine*."

Shane came, and it went through him the way a struck bell goes through bronze, one long shudder from the soles of his feet to the crown of his skull, his spine curving up beneath Ilya's weight until they were chest-to-spine and the linen bunched between his fists like a chewed bit. His cock pulsed in Ilya's fist; hot, thick ropes spattering the linen beneath him, and the clench of his body around Ilya's cock was crushing, rhythmic, involuntary, dragging him in deeper. Shane was sobbing through it, real sobs now, his ribs heaving, tears soaking into the bolster, and the sounds coming out of him were wrecked beyond repair; hitching cries of a man who had been taken apart so thoroughly he'd forgotten how to put himself back together.

Ilya stroked him through it. He kept his hand moving even when Shane flinched and tried to twist away, overstimulated, his cock twitching weakly in Ilya's grip, his body clenching in aftershocks that rippled up through his belly and his shoulders and into his throat. Shane whimpered wetly and Ilya gave him one more stroke, savoring the full-body shudder it produced, before releasing him.

"Good," Ilya murmured. He pressed his mouth to the hinge of Shane's jaw, tasting salt. "So good for me, *Domine*."

Three more thrusts was all it took. The clenching heat of Shane's orgasm dragged Ilya over with him; a white-hot surge that started at the base of his spine and obliterated every thought in his head. He came buried inside Shane with his mouth pressed to the back of Shane's neck, tasting sweat and rose oil, his hips grinding forward in short, helpless jerks as he spilled.

His whole world narrowed to the pulse of it, this shuddering release, Shane's body milking him through it. Behind pinched-shut eyes, Ilya saw the arena and the bedroom at the same time, the killing sand and the white linen, the crowd screaming his wrong name and Shane gasping his right one.

Two names. Two lives. The one Rome had given him and the one and the one Shane was learning the way a man learns a prayer in a dead tongue: by sound first, by meaning after, the lips shaping syllables whose country he would never see, whose mother he would never meet, and still he spoke them. Still he tried. Shane said Ilya the way Ilya's mother had said it. Not perfectly—the stress fell a half-beat late—but with the same bewildering tenderness, as if the name were not a name at all but a door, and he was knocking.

Ilias! Ilias!

Ilya.

Ilya was a slave who had conquered a son of Rome. He was a man so thoroughly conquered he'd forgotten the taste of freedom, and didn't miss it, and would have traded the *rudis* itself for one more night on this bed with Shane's sweat cooling on his tongue.

He collapsed. Shane took his weight without complaint, pinned flat on the ruined linen, both of them heaving for air. Ilya could feel Shane's heart slamming through his ribs, or maybe that was his own. It was impossible to separate their bodies at this distance, everything tangled and slick and overheated.

Shane hadn't stopped shaking. His breathing was still wet, still ragged, his face turned sideways against the bolster where the linen had gone dark with tears and spit. Ilya eased out of him, slowly, and Shane hissed, his used hole clenching on the withdrawal, and a trickle of Ilya's come followed, sliding down the inside of his thigh. Ilya pressed his thumb against Shane's swollen rim, smearing the slick mess of oil and come, and Shane whimpered but didn't pull away. His body had gone boneless and heavy against the bed, all the fight burned out of him, and the tremors running through his thighs were the last embers of an orgasm that had gutted him.

The bite marks on his nape were already darkening, a constellation of bruises in the shape of Ilya's teeth.

Ilya turned him over easily, and Shane went without resistance, which was how Ilya knew he was truly spent—the man who argued with everything, who contested every point, who had once tried to correct Ilya's Latin grammar while being fingered open, now pliant and tear-streaked and blinking up at Ilya with eyes that were swollen and dark and blown.

He looked ruined. He looked like every Roman statute of a conquered nation: all that marble pride brought to its knees.

Ilya kissed the wet skin beneath his eye. Then the other.

"You are devastating," Ilya told him, and meant it in every direction the word could go.

Shane laughed, a hiccupping, waterlogged laugh that crumbled halfway through, and reached up with unsteady hands to pull Ilya down against him.

For a while they lay in the wreck of the bed without speaking, shoulder to shoulder, the lamp burning low enough that the shadows had started to eat the corners of the room.

In these minutes, Ilya permitted himself the dangerous luxury of pretending, and that the locked door was locked to keep the world out, not to keep him *in*. That the sheets under his back was his own. That the man beside him, breathing slow and deep, shoulder warm against his, was also *his own*, and had not paid for this hour and would not pay again next week and the week after, the same sum entered into the same ledger, the cost of Ilya's company reduced to a figure between other figures: wine, oil, the gardener's wages.

He counted, too, too keep himself steady, marking the drip from the fountain and the meter of Shane's breathing. Irrational, inescapable, certainly lay beneath the numbers: if he stopped counting, stopped tracking the small sounds of Shane's body settling against the linen, this room would dissolve and he'd be back in the barracks cell with its straw-and-vinegar smell and its lock on the wrong side of the door.

He was so afraid of losing this he'd never wanted to have it in the first place. And now it was too late, because Shane's shoulder was warm against his and the lamp was burning low and Ilya couldn't remember how he'd slept before these nights existed.

So now, before the lamp died and the guards came to herd him back, Ilya let himself believe that he stayed because he chose to stay, and that the choosing was the whole of it.

The wound on his thigh throbbed in time with his heartbeat and the bruises along his ribs aching every time he drew breath, and neither pain was enough to drown out the other ache, the unfamiliar one, the one that lived in the place where Shane's hip pressed against his and Shane's breathing slowed and Shane's hand crept across the linen to find Ilya's fingers and lace them together as though this were the simplest thing in the world, as though patricians held hands with gladiators every night and it meant nothing and it cost nothing and there was no risk in it at all.

If Shane's father could see this, the hand-holding would damn him worse than the fucking. At least fucking could be dismissed as using a slave's body. This looked like *affection*.

Ilya let it happen.

Their hands lay knotted on the linen between them, half-hidden in the folds. Shane's thumb traced over the blueish lines of veins on the inside of Ilya's wrist, the same wrist a *secutor* had nearly broken in his second year, the same wrist Drusus checked every morning for the value of it, and Shane touched it now as if it were the softest part of him.

It was.

Shane's thumb traced small circles over Ilya's knuckles, and for a long moment neither of them spoke. Then Shane said, so quietly Ilya almost missed it, "My cousin has a villa. Near Comum."

Ilya's eyes opened. "Am I supposed to care about your cousin's real estate?"

"It's on the lake. He never uses it. Too far from Rome, he says, and the neighbors are merchants' families, not proper *gens*." Shane's thumb kept moving, that same small circle, over and over. "He offered to sell it to me last month for a very reasonable price."

"You are a senator's son on the Esquiline Hill," Ilya said. "Why do *you* need a lake villa you will never visit?"

"I didn't say I would never visit it." Shane's other hand drifted to Ilya's chest, tracing the edge of a scar near his sternum, the ridge of a healed fracture along his sixth rib, the thick hooked mark below his left collarbone that Shane's fingers always returned to, the way a

tongue returned to a loose tooth. Ilya had never asked why that scar. He suspected Shane didn't know either; only that it was the oldest, the deepest, the one that had nearly killed the boy before the man could exist.

"Ah," Ilya said, nonplussed, and it was a feint here just the same as he would feint in battle before the killing blow. "You are leaving. Bored of me, *Domine*?"

Shane sent for him. Shane sent for him. Shane sent for him.

Was it about to stop?

"No. And I am leaving, yes, but I hope not alone. I have been thinking about your next fight..." Shane said trailing off as his fingers went still on the scar.

"I have ten days to rest before that," Ilya said.

"Yes, but I heard it might be against the Gaul—Brennos. The one who killed Caelia the Murmillo last month in Capua. I *saw* that fight. Caelia had him on the technique, but Brennos doesn't care about the art of it. He's a butcher. He waits for the bind and then uses his weight to break the forearm over the shield-rim. He's already ended three careers this season by shattering the wrist before the sword is even drawn."

"Yes," Ilya said, eyes sliding shut. He knew the Gaul. He'd seen the way Brennos hooked his fingers through the opponent's visor to pull the head back—a foul that the *editors* usually ignored if there was enough blood. But Ilya was faster. He was always faster. "He is slow, Shane. Big, but slow. Like a grain barge trying to catch a dolphin. Is fine. Bad opponent, but..."

Shane's fingers clamped down on his, and Ilya felt the fear in that grip as clearly as if Shane had spoken it aloud—so he didn't speak either, and they lay there with Shane's hand crushing his while the lamp hissed and the oil level sank another notch.

Shane's breathing leveled and when he spoke again he'd put his public mask back on, the way a man buckled on armor one strap at a time. "What if you didn't have to take the fight?"

Ilya did not move. He tracked the shift in Shane's body—the way his weight settled differently against the mattress, the way his free hand came to rest on his own stomach, a self-soothing gesture Ilya had catalogued months ago. Shane did this when he'd been rehearsing. Shane did this when he had a speech prepared and was terrified of delivering it.

"What," Ilya said flatly.

Shane propped himself up on one elbow. He had the look he got when he was preparing to be very, very reasonable about an unreasonable thing—the same look he probably wore in the Senate when proposing legislation that would cost him allies. "I've been thinking about... your situation with the *lanista*."

Ilya scoffed. "My 'situation' is that Drusus owns me. What is there to think about?"

Shane frowned at him. “Yes, I know that, but—listen to me. Yes, I know that he owns you, you do not have an *auctoramentum*. You were made to swear an oath when you entered the *ludus*, but the oath isn’t what binds you. It is still only the law that does.”

“Senator’s son thinking the law is a simple thing is unsurprising. This changes nothing for me.”

“Just *listen*,” Shane pleaded, and he sat straighter, the sheet pooling at his waist, and Ilya could see him reaching for the rhetorical scaffolding of his education, lining up arguments the way a legionnaire lined up javelins. “I’ve spent the last three weeks looking into the legal framework, and I had my advocate pull precedents from the *praetor*’s records, and, yes, under the law, you are his property. You can’t own anything. You can’t testify in court. If you walked out of the gates tomorrow, the magistrate would have you dragged back in chains, and Drusus could flog you, sell you, or send you to the mines, and no one in the Senate would blink. *But* a patron of sufficient standing can negotiate the transfer of a gladiator’s bond and then execute a *manumissio vindicta* before a magistrate. Citizenship isn’t guaranteed, but with the right advocate and enough of my own military and civic contribution...”

Ilya stared at him, no longer listening to the rambling, large-worded, explanation being flung at him. The post-sex haze was thinning fast, cold clarity seeping in at the edges.

“I could be fucking you again now, and instead this is what you want to do?”

“*Ilya*, we need to talk about it because—” Shane’s Latin faltered. He pressed his lips together and when he spoke again, the oration was gone and what came out was barely above a whisper. “Because you could die on that sand any afternoon and I would have to sit in those seats and *watch*, and I could not even claim your body for burial. Drusus would sell your armor to the next fighter and your corpse to the *spoliarii* and I would go home and no one in this city would know that—” He cut himself off. His knuckles had gone white against the sheets once more. “We need to talk about it because property can be *sold*.”

“You... are talking about buying me.”

“I’m talking about buying your freedom, yes.”

Sound from the fountain in the atrium drifted through the walls, the faint drip of water on tile, and the thud of his own heartbeat. The lake villa made more sense now, and what it meant was more clear: distance from Rome, from the Senate, from the arena. Privacy and seclusion. A place where a Roman could live however he wanted without patrician neighbors cataloging his guests. It was likely that the people there would not care what happened inside a rich man’s villa; They would only care what he did in public. Rome confuses the two on purpose.

He thought about Shane’s cousin calling the neighbors “merchants’ families” with disdain, which meant the neighbors wouldn’t care if a patrician showed up with a foreign freedman and never left.

Let me keep you, Shane had gasped earlier, half-delirious. Now here he was, talking about Comum, and Ilya understood with sudden, sick clarity that Shane wasn’t fantasizing.

Shane was *planning*.

“You are drunk,” Ilya said, because this far-fetched idea was as odious as any other scheme after too many cups.

“I haven’t touched the wine.”

“Then you are stupid. I am not free. I cannot be kept. I can only be owned, and you do not own me. Drusus owns me. You rent me.” He said it harshly, wanting Shane to flinch again, wanting to kill, to outright slaughter, whatever hope was building in Shane’s eyes before it metastasized into something worse.

“But if you would only listen—”

“Your cousin has a villa you want to buy so you can run away from Rome and take me with you, except you cannot *take* me anywhere because I am a slave, Shane, I am not your—” He stopped. He didn’t have a word for what he wasn’t. Lover was too simple. Whore was too crude. Whatever he was to Shane, it didn’t have a name in Latin or his own tongue or any language spoken around the Middle Sea.

Shane’s lips pressed into a line. “I’m not deluded. I know what you are, and more importantly, *who*.”

Ilya looked away, his gaze catching the flickering shadow of the lamp on the wall. He thought of the mud in the Danube basin. He thought of his brother, Andrei, who had looked at Ilya’s growing shoulders and his terrifying speed with a sword and saw not a sibling, but a way to pay the tithes for their father’s failing farm. Andrei had been the one to sign the papers for the *lanista*. He’d taken the coin without looking Ilya in the eye.

Ilya had been thirteen and spent his birthday in the barracks as a *thing* and a *slave* and something *owned*.

To be free once more, he would first have to become Shane’s property in the eyes of the law, a *thing* and a *slave* and *owned* all over again. He would go from the *lanista*’s ledger to Shane’s household account. His life would be a line item in a patrician’s account. Shane would hold the deed to his life, his breath, and the very skin he was currently pressed against.

Ilya’s stomach did a slow, nauseating flip.

“Do you understand what that would cost you?” Ilya said. “Not the sestertii. The money is nothing to you, I know. I mean what it would *cost* to *you*. A patrician, buying a gladiator as his pet. The Senate would pick your bones clean before the month was out. They would whisper in the baths about the Senator’s son who keeps a barbarian killer like a pampered lapdog. They would say you are depraved. They would say—”

“I know what they would say.”

“They would say you bought yourself a *concubinus*. A barbarian *whore*.” Ilya made himself say it, because Shane needed to hear the shape of it in someone else’s mouth before it was

said behind his back. “Every senator who has ever envied your family’s position would use it to gut you.”

“Let them,” Shane said it the way he said everything that mattered—without drama, without emphasis, as though the answer were so obvious it barely merited speaking aloud. There would be rumors about *who* was taking *who*, and it was clear that Shane knew this. He knew that the danger was not that he lay with a man, but that the wrong men might decide he had lain down. The rumor would not say he took a gladiator to bed. It would say the gladiator took him and still ‘let them’.

Two words that would cost him half his political alliances and he delivered them with the same energy he used to order wine. “You are more important to me than... than front row seats at the theatre or a path to the Consulship.”

“My brother would laugh at you, *Domine*,” Ilya said, a mean glint in his eyes. He looked down at Shane—sprawled in his own ruined bed, oil still gleaming on his thighs, Ilya’s spend drying on his skin, his hair wrecked and his eyes steady as a surveyor’s line, and felt a vertigo like a concussion building behind his eyes.

This man. This absurd, reckless, stubborn, *brilliant* Roman would burn down his own career to keep Ilya from bleeding on sand, and he’d clearly decided it was a *reasonable* trade, and the worst part was that Ilya could not find the flaw in his logic.

“He sold me for the price of one ox and a falling-apart wagon, and here you are, willing to trade your whole reputation. Is a very expensive scandal, Shane. You think you can afford me?” Ilya pushed up on one elbow, the linen sliding off his chest, and let Shane look at him: the full spread of it, the body Rome screamed for, the shoulders and the scars and the lazy tilt of his hips. “I am the most famous gladiator in this city. Drusus charges three senators’ ransoms for a private evening with me and turns down two out of three offers. *You* he charges four, because you keep paying.” He smiled, slow and mean. “And you want to know the real scandal? The price should be higher. I am worth it. You would have to buy me a silk collar and feed me peacock tongues. Your father would die of the shame before I even finished my first meal. And if I am no longer a gladiator what am I? A freedman with no trade. A barbarian in Rome with no patron, am I just then the man that warms your bed? What would I *have*?”

“You would have me,” Shane said, and his Latin stumbled on the verb—*habere*, to have, to hold, to possess—as though he understood, even in the asking, that the word cut both ways. “And if you wanted, we could be... together.”

“That is not the same as having a life.”

“It could be.” Shane’s hand came up and rested on Ilya’s thigh, next to the bandage, not touching the wound but close enough that Ilya felt the warmth of his palm. “If I buy you, Ilya, *Ilya*, you could refuse a bout or even hold property through my name. You could work, doing anything you wished. I would not deny you. And... and if the *editor* grants the rudis, and with your record and my family’s pressure... there might be yet more. There are precedents in the *praetor*’s records; citizenship grants have been awarded before, to gladiators with far fewer victories than you. Drusus would not release you easily, of course,

and... the *editor* might refuse the rudis. And if the Senate wants to make an example of me..."

He shrugged once. "They will, I think, regardless. But it can be done."

"And if the *editor* refuses?" Ilya said. "If Drusus doubles the price because he sees your desperation? If the Senate decides to make a lesson of the Hollandus boy and his barbarian pet? You will have spent your inheritance on a man who still sleeps in a cage every night and fights in the sand every morning."

"I have solicited five advocates—"

"*Five*. You consulted *five* advocates about buying a gladiator and you think no one is going to talk? Romans cannot keep a secret if their lives depended on it. You people gossip more than my grandmother, and she was the worst woman in our village."

A fissure manifested in Shane's face, just the ghost of a laugh he was clearly trying to strangle. "Your grandmother."

"She told everyone everything. Who was sleeping with whose wife, whose cow had died, whose son was a fool. You would have liked her. She was very *organized* and she was *busy*. Just as *you* have been busy," Ilya said. The flatness in his own voice surprised him. Shane had done *research*. Shane had gone to advocates, consulted legal texts, mapped out a path through Roman bureaucracy to drag Ilya out of the arena and into... what? His household? His life?

"How long have you been scheming?"

Shane had the decency to look caught. "I wanted to know if it was possible before I brought it to you."

"Before you asked me if I even wanted it?"

Shane frowned, looking conflicted. "I didn't want to offer you something I couldn't deliver. But I *can*, I could buy you from Drusus, and then free you before a magistrate. You'd never set foot in the arena again. And then the villa, it is peaceful and private, we could be alone... together."

That was so perfectly *Shane* that Ilya almost laughed. Prepare everything, research everything, control every variable, and only then present the finished product as though it had been effortless. As though he hadn't spent weeks terrified of this exact moment.

"Do you?" Shane asked, a beat later. "Want it?"

Ilya's first impulse was to shove the question away; he would make a joke, then deflect with the arrogance that had kept him alive in the *ludus* since he was a child. He was good at deflection. He was good at performance. He was good at grinning for Rome and his betters while his shoulder bled and his ribs screamed and men died at his feet.

He looked at Shane. The lamp guttered, and the light shifted, and Shane's face was half in shadow and half in gold and his hand was steady on Ilya's thigh.

"I... want to not die in the sand," Ilya said. "I am the best. I know I am the best. But one day I will not be, and on that day the *editor* will turn his thumb, and that will be the end of it. I have always known this. Every gladiator knows this. But I know better than to covet what I cannot have, *Domine*."

Shane's fingers pressed his thigh, bypassing the wound to find the unbroken skin beside it, and the warmth of his palm sank in slowly, the way it always did when Shane touched him like this, giving attention to the unmarked parts of his body just as much as the more interesting, battle-hardened, damaged ones.

"Would you still want me?" Ilya asked. "If I were not this. If I had no crowd, no name, no—"

He gestured at his own body, the scars, the muscle, the spectacle of him. He was mocking him—testing if the Senator's son had the stomach for the barbarian he'd paid so much to see in private. "I am forever an outsider. A nothing. Would you want what is underneath that?"

"I'm in this bed with you because of what's underneath it." Shane's hand stayed on his thigh. His breathing had gone shallow. He did not repeat himself, and he did not look away, and Ilya understood that this was all the armor Shane had left—the words themselves, offered once and not defended.

Ilya looked at him, and the room filled in around the looking: the fountain pulsing in the atrium, the lamp eating through its oil with a low hiss, and somewhere deeper in the house a clay pot hit tile. Shane's world was moving, but Shane himself held still, waiting.

He looked like he was bracing for a hit.

Ilya didn't give him one. He leaned down and kissed him instead, hard enough to bruise, and Shane pulled him in, his fingers digging into Ilya's scarred shoulders.

Outside the heavy cedar door, the rhythmic *slap-slap* of a slave's sandals echoed down the corridor, followed by the muffled clatter of a wine-service being prepared. Shane heard it and didn't flinch; instead, he gripped Ilya's hair tighter, pulling his head back to expose the sweat-slicked line of his throat. He was a Senator's son, a man of *gravitas* and public standing, but here, in the dark, he was loud. He wanted the house to hear him being unmade by a man who, by every law in Rome, was nothing more than a tool.

The footsteps moved on.

He bit down on Shane's collarbone and Shane's hips jerked up, gracelessly. There was no dignity left in him, Ilya had taken it all and Shane had let him, the same way he'd let Ilya through the door every night this month, the same way he'd gasped Ilya's name into the sheets. The arena had given Ilya scars and a reputation and enough coin to buy himself free if he lived long enough.

If he lived long enough.

Shane could give him that freedom outright, could sign the papers tonight if he wanted.

If he wanted.

“You would have me,” Shane said again, and again there it was *habere*, to own and possess, “Ilya please, if you let me—”

“Enough, Shane.” Ilya didn’t let him finish. He put his hand over Shane’s mouth and felt the damp heat of his breath against his palm, the startled flutter of his lips.

Shane’s eyes went wide at the use of his *name*.

Latin was beyond Ilya now. *You cannot give me what I already take*, he wanted to say. *I have owned you since the first time you watched me kill and couldn’t look away*. What he said instead was nothing. He replaced his hand with his mouth and kissed Shane until the offer dissolved between them, until Shane stopped trying to be generous and started trying to breathe.

Shane arched beneath him, the whole lean length of his body pressed tight against Ilya’s, his fingers scrabbling at the sheets, at Ilya’s shoulders, at anything solid. Shane had the villa and the name and the gold and the right to walk into any magistrate’s office and write Ilya’s future in ink. And here he was, stripped down to sweat and skin, shaking apart because Ilya told him to.

Ilya pressed his mouth to the hinge of Shane’s jaw and tasted the salt of him there, feeling sounds he made against his lips before it reached the air.

You could own me, Ilya thought, rolling his hips slow and watching Shane splinter and shatter. *By law and by contract, by the scratch of a stylus on a tablet of wax. You could own me, and I would let you.*

But not like this.

He braced one hand beside Shane’s head and drove deeper, and Shane’s back left the bed, his mouth open and wordless, his hands finally finding Ilya’s hips and gripping hard enough to bruise.

Like this, you are mine.

Shane was what the sand paid for.

Shane was what the blood had bought.

Shane *would* save him if Ilya let him. Shane was not cruel, and Shane was not patient, and sooner or later, Shane would do it whether Ilya agreed or not, because that was who he was: a man who saw a wrong and could not leave it standing.

And Ilya would let himself be saved. Tomorrow, or the day after, or whenever his pride finished choking on it.

And if, tomorrow, the *editor* turned his thumb and the sand drank him down, if the last thing Ilya saw was Roman sky through the bars of his helmet, he would die with this. Shane's thighs were locked around his waist and Shane was saying his name—not *gladiator*, not *Ilias*, his *name*—and Ilya was the only god in this room worth praying to.

With the knowledge that one man in this city had spoken to the thing beneath the scar tissue and the spectacle and the borrowed Latin, and that thing had answered, and the answer had been: *yes, yours, always, even now, even after, when I am nothing but a name scratched into a tavern wall and you are old and gray and Rome has forgotten us both.*

I am yours. You own me. You are mine. I own you.

Spolia Victoris.

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Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🖼️ “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🗡️ “Does the *Dominus* enjoy serving a *slave*?”
- 📜 “Roman Shane's 82AD Secret Fuck Villa”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”

Glossary / Terms:

Amphitheatrum - A Roman arena designed for public spectacles, especially gladiatorial games and animal hunts. The Flavian Amphitheater in Rome is now called the Colosseum.

Auctoramentum - The oath sworn by a gladiator binding him to his lanista and the ludus. It subjected the gladiator to punishment, injury, and death at the owner's discretion.

Balteus - A wide belt worn by soldiers and gladiators to support weapons and armor.

Barbarus - A foreigner, especially one outside Roman culture and law. Not necessarily savage, but by definition uncivilized and subordinate in Roman ideology.

Cinaedus - A deeply insulting term for a man perceived as sexually passive, effeminate, or lacking masculine self-control. The stigma attached to loss of status and dominance, not same-sex desire itself.

Cursus honorum - The formal sequence of public offices required for a Roman political career, typically beginning with military service and leading through magistracies to the Senate.

Doctore - A trainer in a gladiatorial school. Responsible for combat instruction, conditioning, and survival techniques.

Dominus - Master or owner. Used when referring to a master in the third person, ie, ‘The Dominus’

Domine - Vocative form of dominus. Used when directly addressing one's master, ie, ‘Hello, Domine’

Editor muneris - The official who sponsored and oversaw gladiatorial games. He had authority over pairings, discipline, and the final decision of life or death.

Lanista - The owner and manager of a gladiatorial school. Gladiators were his legal property.

Ludus - A gladiatorial training school and barracks.

Manica - An armored sleeve worn on the sword arm by some gladiators.

Manumissio vindicta - A formal legal process of freeing a slave before a magistrate, often granting Roman citizenship.

Munerarius - The sponsor or financier of gladiatorial games.

Ocrea - A greave worn to protect the shin.

Patrician - A member of Rome's ancient aristocratic families. By the Imperial period, largely a status of birth rather than political power.

Paterfamilias - The male head of a Roman household, holding legal authority over property, children, and slaves.

Plebs - The common people of Rome, excluding the senatorial and equestrian orders.

Porta Sanavivaria - The “Gate of Life,” through which victorious gladiators exited the arena.

Praetor - A senior magistrate with judicial authority. Praetors oversaw courts and legal procedures including manumission.

Rudiarius/rudis - The rudis was the wooden sword awarded to a gladiator upon honorable discharge, symbolizing freedom.

Scutum - A large rectangular shield used by Roman soldiers and some gladiators.

Servus - Slave. A legal status denoting complete lack of personal rights under Roman law.

Spoliarium/Spoliarii - A chamber where the bodies of dead gladiators were stripped of armor and valuables and its attendants.

Subligaculum - A loincloth worn as undergarment by gladiators and laborers.

Thraex (Thracian) - A type of gladiator armed with a curved sword (sica) and small shield (parmula), originally inspired by Thracian fighters.

Venatio - An arena spectacle involving the hunting or fighting of wild animals.

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