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High up from Charles and Rachel's cliff side home, Port Royal at night is a breathtaking sight. Catering to both civil and commercial traffic recreational sail is the most numerous vessel type moored in the harbor. Every permutation of rig you could imagine, from the simple sloops to rigid-foil trimarans are anchored here, but the dominate rigs as far as the eye can see are the dhow and old school felucca.

The port complex is butted up to the main city of Ipet Hah, and where the architecture of the city is a mix of ancient Egyptian in the core, surrounded by classical Roman everywhere else, Port Royal is a contrast of Egyptian stone permanency salted with modern glass contemporary and, esthetically speaking, these styles don't clash at all. Branching out from Ipet Hah is a new and ever-expanding suburbia, whose style is akin to American Southwest and Pueblo, but the people adapted well to having elbow room instead of being stacked one on top of another back in the city like they have been for millennia.

Most of the residents here on Imi came from old world human civilizations where toilets and baths were communal, with no concept of personal space, so the odd freakishness of western modesty eludes them still even though they now enjoy a sense of privacy.

The surprisingly difficult things to adapt too were transitioning from the Roman 'always left' standard to the modern 'always right' for roadway traffic, but that happened before Charles and Rachel came so the people could not blame them. What the locals could point at them for was the hated metric system—which everyone here resented being crowbarred into their world. Giving up their *passus*, *congus* and *uncia* for meters and liters and grams was like pulling teeth.

Yet, to industrialize on par it was necessary.

Now, long ago human males were first brought to this world as romantic surrogates, to take the heat off the Nefer Key males, and this was a positive thing in the minds of those captives then. To trade one subjugation of short lives, hunger, hard labor and violence for one of long lives, full bellies and endless sex in the service of, what they believed to be, petite gorgeous gray goddesses was a no brainer for them. What little down time they did have these humans just didn't sit on idle hands—they built things, lots of things, and this impressed the shit out of the Nefer Key. The old city temples were designed for their pleasure and is a sprawling complex still in daily use with pools and baths, luxurious couches, oil lamps with incense, and drapery flowing in the breeze for as far as the eye can see. Where across the way on the planet Sashi the Nefer Key live in an up-scaled but stale vision of Tomorrowland, by contrast, the warm esthetics of Imi was shockingly aphrodisiacal to female Nefer Key sensibilities.

Point being, these primitive humans erected massive stone structures and gardens with clean running water with little more than timbers, rope, levers and chalk lines. Two million years ago, the Nefer Key themselves were primitive captives and when they gained their freedom they walked right into advanced technology and bypassed these intermediate periods of development altogether. What humans accomplished here, without the aid of computers, robots and heavy machinery, was a miraculous feat by Nefer Key standards.

Another thing that impressed them to no end, something they found both counterintuitive and bewildering, was the human ability to fight and even wage war amongst each other—a concept the Nefer Key seems to have lost after thousands of generations of the easy life.

They just couldn't get the hang of it so they fetched Marcus, and when Marcus realized he was finally out of his league they then groomed and snatched Charles up with surprisingly little effort.

With their toga party for Marcus breaking up we have Jason, Lilith, Charles, Rachel, Maat and his Nefer Key wife, Aat, looking out over the harbor. A short throw below them is a felucca heading into the bay, and in it is Marcus reclining in a large pile of cushions with Claudia Willoughby snuggling up to him.

Sex under the stars or the shine of Sashi, like now, is the reason for most of the sailboats here. You can work them manually, yes, but pretty much all of the boats are computer controlled and sail themselves—you just have to shove off and dock manually and this allows the riders to attend to other pressing matters.

Rachel nudges Charles, "We're gonna hav'ta get a boat."

Amused, Charles agrees, "Yup, we can do it under the stars!"

Rachel coyly says, "Waddya mean we?"

Charles huffs a laugh as Rachel gives him a guilty shrug, "I've been meaning to have one made but Marcus is giving us his."

"No shit!"

"Tomorrow, that's our boat." Charles thinks about it and, "When was the last time he was with a woman? A human woman?"

Aat speaks up, "That would be before we got him."

Lilith notes, "Human babes have always been in high demand around here, and are spread thin."

Behind them, Claudia's Secret Service agent, Zach, has stepped up while saying, "Yea, but I think Claudia has made up for the lack of numbers. She's been making the rounds."

With everyone smiling and nodding at that, Maat thinks about it, "Prima and Marcus were mostly exclusive, and he hasn't been with anyone since she died. I'm surprised Claudia got him on that boat."

Rachel looks to Aat, then her husband, "No offense, Aat, but would you turn her down?"

Aat quickly throws out, "I didn't turn her down!"

Maat looks to Rachel with a smile, "What she said."

With everyone laughing, Charles looks to Zach and asks him, "Everything ready?"

Zach nods big, "Yup! We just got done fixin' the place up, and right under the wire. The facility is old but the decks will hold."

Rachel looks at Jason and asks, "You really want to do this?"

Jason gestures towards Marcus in the boat drifting away and declares, "I love this man. It's my gift. I'm obligated to him."

Charles speaks up, "Jay, remind me not to exchange gifts with you when I'm feelin' kinda blue."

Lilith turns to Zach and asks, "So, Secret Service man, I've been meaning to ask. You got any ideas for our training? I have a bunch of us girls ready to do this so, what do I tell 'em?"

Zach asks, "Want me to tell her, Chuck?"

"Might as well..." Charles then says to Lilith, "I was hoping for a way to go easy on you, but that ain't gonna happen. Tell her, Zach, and don't sugarcoat it."

Zach huffs then, "We looked high and low for ways to cut corners with your people but we can't. To make you into soldiers is a

tall order because you grays have no discipline, none of you have had any hardship whatsoever, and to top it off you're lazy as fuck. It takes your people forever to get anything done, and the worst of it is that none of you have worked an honest day's work in your lives! What we're gonna half'ta do to you people, to instill discipline in you, well, it ain't gonna be fun and that I can guarantee."

Charles points out, "The one thing in your favor is that you are all in great physical condition and you're going to need it."

Lilith blinks then asks, "Need it for what?"

Zach shrugs big, "Paris Island?"

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Sitting across from each other in a dark passage, with stray beams of light peeking through the cracks around the doors covering the entrance, Marcus and Jason are waiting for their turn. They can hear the crowd outside, a mix of human and Nefer Key voices, all of them shouting and cheering for whatever is performing to the driving ninety mile an hour beat of an African drumline.

After the longest silence between them, Marcus looks up and says, "You are being inordinately quiet."

Jason shrugs, "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, say something maybe?"

"Something." With Marcus shaking his head, Jason then asks, "Okay, I'm curious, how was Claudia?"

"Fantastic...but it made me miss Prima all the more."

Jason nods with understanding then, "Hey, when we get out there, do we say like, *nos morituri te salutant* or what?"

Marcus chuckles, "Nobody ever said that shit."

"Oh, okay...so, Luc gives a speech and it's on?"

"Yup."

After another silence, they hear Zach call out from the other side of the door, "One minute, you two."

Jason looks Marcus square in the eyes and reassures him, "Remember...with blades, CQB, I'm a god. Nobody can beat me and you know that. You're gonna feel more alive than you have in a long time but, for this to work, for your desired outcome, you gotta fight me. Don't be a puss and I'll get you where you wanna go."

With the crowd cheering, Marcus says through clinched teeth,

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Jason smiles, "Who do you think you're talking too?"

Marcus nods, "Point made."

"There's a stack of timber out there waiting for you, but you have to fight me to get to it." Suddenly the doors open, and as the light pours in, Jason stresses, "In this here theatre in the round, let's not make it look just good, dude. Let's make it real, okay?"

As they stand, Marcus asks, "Don't hold back?"

Jason singsongs, "That's the idea!"

Stepping out onto the sandy floor of the arena there are over twelve-thousand in the stands cheering for them. Walking away from Marcus and Jason are thirty costumed Zaouli dancers of mixed races who are waving to the crowd, and lining up with another two hundred men along the perimeter of the arena floor—Egyptian, Syrian, Roman, Jew, Gaul, Thracian, Scots, Mongol, Zhou, Nippon, Welsh, Norse, Ashanti, Songhai, and the Guro who brought the dance.

All here to honor their long time commander and friend.

Marcus and Jason are dressed for the moment with metal greaves on their shins and manicae protecting their arms, but where Marcus has one on his right side Jason gets both arms covered.

Before them are five Zaouli dancers. All have the smiling and angelic Djela mask, but each costume is framed radically different. In front of Jason is an orange cheetah and a rainbow parrot themed dancer, and before Marcus is a green and brown bison and a purple gazelle. Between them is a master Guro dancer in a black and yellow honeybee stylized costume. With the drumline hammering out a walking beat the bee performs a complicated foot dance as the other four strut around with a bladed weapon in hand. Two swinging a dagger tipped Mainz-Fulham style gladius, and two with gracefully curved yet exactly honed falx-like sica.

The four thrust and spin the weapons in the air, working the crowd up into a frenzy, and as the drums stop the bee dancer freezes. Suddenly the drums bust into hyper drive and all five kick up dust in time with the beat—their upper bodies suspended and unmoving as their legs and feet go stomping wildly in lockstep. They hold out the weapons and slowly approach the two combatants, all the while the bee hauls over a large scutum shield for Marcus.

The drums break-beat and then continue on as the dancers now load Marcus up with a spare gladius on his left side with the scutum, and the free gladius in his right hand. Next is Jason, and the second he is handed his two sica the five Zaouli dancers pick up the

beat of the drums and stomp-dance away to the edge of the arena all the while gladiator cassis helmets are lowered onto their heads.

It's only the purple gazelle that hangs back with Marcus and Jason in the middle of the arena. Now solo, with his feet tearing it up, little gray hands flip horsehair whips back and forth to the rhythm of the drums. After another half-a-minute of him dancing he and the drums suddenly stop and the dancer whips back his mask.

It's Luc behind the mask, and with the crowd now cheering wildly for him he says to both Jason and Marcus, "Ya know, when my tongue turns white, I hope that I have the foresight to make damned sure everybody is annoyed with me."

Jason snorts, "You got that now!"

Luc nods with a smile and says, "We love you, Marcus."

Luc steps back and pulls a wire mic around to speak to the crowd, "We are here today to celebrate the life of our friend and loved one, Marcus Cnaeus Septimus." With a sweep of his arm, Luc motions behind them towards a funeral pyre. The pyre is beautifully stacked with Roman banners draping over the sides and a fasces adorning each corner. Luc adds, "Our gift to you, awaits."

With the drums kicking in, Marcus watches as Luc walks over to hug Maat who was in the parrot Zaouli dance costume and Abeeku who emerged from the bison costume. In the stands behind them he has everyone cheering him on, all except Charles and Rachel.

Charles is taking this especially hard.

Marcus looks to Jason and asks, "So it's on?"

"Yep..." Jason gestures towards the pyre, "I'm gonna hate to touch a match to that thing. Even with your ass on it, dude!"

Marcus reaches out with his gladius and says, "Honor."

Jason crosses that blade with his sica, "Damned straight."

Historically, gladiatorial bouts between professional gladiators was pretty much the WWE of the ancient Roman world. Many people died on the sands of the arena but few of them were from pro-stock. The high-end professionals learned to make it look good so working together to make a good show of it the crowd would, more often than not, give an up-vote for the loser to fight another day. Sad to say that attrition got the better of them in the end. A lot of capital went into a 'seasoned' gladiator so for one to enter into an actual no holds barred death match was indeed a rarity—and that working together thing to make it look good kind of went out the window.

But, for today its opposites day...

Having been a centurion for the longest time Marcus logically gravitated to the Murmillo class of fighting, and having once been a boarding party duel-wielding asshole of a pirate Jason instinctively opted for the Thraex.

A good thing since these classes matched regularly.

The battle starts off simple enough with Marcus making quick stabbing thrusts towards Jason, as one would while fighting in a tight formation in the field, but Jason swats them away with ease.

After the tenth thrust, Jason flips the helmet off his own head, "I can't see shit!" Then motions for Marcus to, "Step into it!"

Marcus steps into it by leaping forward and thrusting out hard. For the casual observer it looks pretty good, but Jason can see that he was intentionally throwing his aim off towards the side, so in a huff Jason punches down on Marcus' helmet, "Get serious!"

As Jason rolls past the strike he pops Marcus in the back with two quick slashes across his shoulder blades to get his attention.

Fuming, Marcus scrunches his shoulders up from the pain. He then rips his own helmet off and stomps towards Jason. He thrusts his shield out and slams it into Jason who jumps back just as the gladius slashes out where he was a second ago.

Jason nods big with a grin, "That's the idea!"

Marcus again steps in and thrusts out perfectly, Jason parries it away with the left sica while with the right sica he flips it around the shield and slashes Marcus in the chest. It is a superficial cut but it bleeds like hell and it makes him drop the shield. Now mad, Marcus pulls the spare gladius with his left hand and sets to work.

Jason is impressed by the thrust and slash combos that Marcus now throws at him. This is a style that Jason has never seen and it is totally amateurish—and yet so surprisingly effective. Marcus will not let up and the three times a gladius snags on the manicae covering Jason's arms it prompts Marcus to push even harder.

After about a minute and a half of this thrust, slash and parry barrage, Marcus is now obviously losing steam, so during a slight break in the action Jason says to him, "Give her our love."

Jason has finally spun the sica around in his hands, with the blades now along his forearms, and after three more quick attacks and blocks he steps inside where Marcus can't get either gladius around to fight back effectively. Jason slashes Marcus' left arm and he drops that gladius. They grapple for a few seconds and when Jason hops back Marcus lunges at him. Jason pushes the gladius away with the blade in his left hand, but with the one in the right he drives it home.

The hooked blade slips in behind Marcus' left clavicle and Jason sinks it deep into his chest cavity—slicing through the brachial veins, lungs and piercing the heart. Marcus drops to his knees in total shock by the suddenness of this strike.

In the arena it's now so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

Marcus looks up at Jason with the handle of the sica moving in time with his heartbeat, and with blood filling his chest and his lungs near collapse he has very little time left, but the confusion and shock on Marcus' face suddenly gives way to a far and distant yet joyful recognition. With that, he silently mouths her name, *Prima?*

Jason does well to hide the grief that overwhelms him, and before he pulls the sica from Marcus he says, "Go to her."