

GARGANTUA

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Lukan was no stranger to executions.

He had been eleven when he'd first seen a man die, and, though he'd long forgotten the man's crimes, he could still recall the silver blur of the executioner's blade as it swept down, and the crimson spray that followed. He remembered being surprised by how quickly it had happened, how simple the act of killing was. The executioner—their features concealed behind a golden filigree mask—had picked the head up and held it aloft, striking a series of dramatic poses as the crowd cheered. Lukan had quickly learned that in Parva, the self-proclaimed capital of culture in the Old Empire, even the executions had to be carried out with a sense of theater. None of those he'd seen on his travels had possessed quite the same dramatic flair, leading him to believe that his home city stood apart when it came to making a spectacle of death.

*Seems I was wrong*, he thought now, as he surveyed the crowded amphitheater.

Several thousand people had come to witness Zandrusa's execution—*possible* execution, he corrected himself—and the sound of their laughter and conversation echoed across the tiers of stone seating and across the hard-packed dirt of the arena's floor. If Lukan hadn't known any better, he would have thought this was some sort of carnival or sporting event. He shifted on the bench, noting that many of the people around him had brought their own cushions to sit on. *Nothing like sitting comfortably while you watch someone die.*

Flea sat beside him, eating some grapes she'd lifted from a stall outside. As Lukan watched, she plucked another grape from the

bunch and—taking careful aim—tossed it at a man sitting a few rows in front of them. She snorted as it struck the back of his head, causing him to glance around, eyes narrowed in suspicion. As the man turned away, the girl prepared to throw another.

Lukan caught her wrist. “Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because what did I tell you yesterday, when that innkeeper heard you say his face looked like a . . . what was it—”

“Smacked arse.”

“Right. And what did I tell you?”

“Not to upset people and attract attention.”

“Exactly.” He released her arm. “I don’t want to have to remind you again.”

The girl rolled her eyes and popped the grape into her mouth. Even so, Lukan found himself wondering—not for the first time—whether he’d made a mistake in accepting her offer of further assistance. He’d thought they would part ways after his meeting with Obassa—after all, Flea had got her coin and he’d obtained the information he sought. Yet the street girl, no doubt sensing the opportunity for some easy money, had suggested she accompany him for a while, and it occurred to Lukan that having someone to show him around Saphrona wouldn’t be a bad thing. So after some prolonged negotiating (the girl was stubborn as the hells, to put it mildly) they’d reached an agreement. Only time would tell whether it would prove a mistake on his part; some of the girl’s behavior so far had certainly caused him to question his judgment. Still, Flea had at least shown him to a decent inn called the Orange Tree, where he’d slept well and not been robbed in the night, so it hadn’t been a bad start.

“Oh, look,” the girl said, pointing across the amphitheater to a private enclosure of polished marble and purple velvet drapes. “The merchant princes.”

“I see them,” Lukan replied, watching as Saphrona’s elite citizens sipped from crystal glasses and chatted among themselves as they took their seats. Even from a distance there was no mistaking

their silks and jewelry—or their relaxed demeanors. *Zandrusa's former peers arriving to watch her die, and not looking at all concerned by the prospect. Quite the opposite, in fact.*

“It won't be long now,” Flea said, popping another grape into her mouth.

Lukan turned his attention to the arena floor.

To the Bone Pit.

The circular stone platform was some forty yards in diameter. A large bronze disc was set at its center, its surface embossed with details that he couldn't make out. Four bones—presumably from the monster whose skull loomed above the waterfront gate—stood at the edge of the platform, one at each compass point. Iron collars and manacles hung from them on chains, dark with rust. *Or blood*, he thought, feeling a flicker of trepidation. *It can't be true*, he thought, recalling what Flea had told him the night before. *It can't be. She's playing me for a fool. Gellame made no mention of a giant—*

“Here they come,” Flea said, just as a murmur of excitement rippled around the amphitheater. The gates at the eastern end, away to their right, were slowly opening. A detachment of constables emerged from the darkness beyond, marching out in two columns, their conical bronze helms glinting in the sunlight. Between them shuffled three figures, all dressed in grey, their hands cuffed behind their backs. *The prisoners*, Lukan realized.

The first was a youth, still in his teens. The second was a man of middle years, his beard streaked with grey. *Which can only mean . . .* He eyed the third figure, a tall woman with light brown skin. *That must be Zandrusa*. In contrast to her fellow prisoners, the merchant prince held her shaven head high, her expression impassive. While the two men cowered beneath the roar of the crowd, she seemed to breathe it in and grow in stature. *What connection do you have to my father?* Lukan wondered. He could only hope she lived long enough for him to find out.

As the prisoners and their escort approached the Bone Pit, a second group entered the arena. Seven figures, wearing silk robes

of varying colors. Their faces were hidden by extravagant masks, each one a grotesque parody of a human face.

“Who are they?” Lukan asked, having to raise his voice over the noise of the crowd.

“The Keepers of the Seven Shadows,” the girl replied, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t you know *anything* about Saphrona?”

“That’s why I’m paying you.” He plucked a grape from the bunch in the girl’s lap, ignoring her glare. “So what’s their role in this?”

“Each one represents a different shadow,” she replied, swatting away his hand as he reached for another. “That’s why they all wear different masks.”

“So let me guess,” Lukan said, squinting at a figure in a crimson robe whose scarlet-colored mask resembled a snarling face with an almost demonic aspect. “That one in red represents Bloodlust, right?”

“Yeah.” The girl pointed at each of the figures, ticking them off in turn. “Avarice, Envy, Impurity, Corruption, Defilement, and Deceit.”

“They must be sweating in those masks.” Lukan’s gaze flicked back to the gate as two more figures appeared—a man and a woman, both dark-haired with olive skin, clad in identical outfits of sleeveless leather tunics, black leather trousers, and tall boots. A thin chain dangled between them, connecting a silver band on the man’s right wrist to an identical band on the woman’s left. Even from a distance there was no mistaking their self-confidence; they strutted across the arena floor as if they owned the place.

“Look, the Constanza twins!” Flea said excitedly, nudging him in the ribs and pointing at the newcomers. “They’re gleamers.”

“Yeah,” Lukan replied, his lip curling in distaste. “I can tell.” *I know their kind all too well.*

He ignored Flea’s questioning look and watched as the prisoners and their escort of guards reached the stone platform and ascended the steps carved into its side. Suddenly the youth turned and bolted down the steps, twisting away from the guards’ desperate attempts

to restrain him. He ran back toward the gates with a frenzied energy born of terror, the crowd roaring with excitement at this unexpected development. The seven Keepers parted to let him through; clearly none of them fancied getting their silk robes dirty.

All that now stood between the prisoner and his escape were the two gleamers.

*The poor boy doesn't stand a chance*, Lukan thought.

The twins shared an amused glance, the chain that bound their wrists slackening as they clasped hands. They pivoted smoothly, the woman taking up position at the front, right arm outstretched, fingers splayed. Her brother stood behind, head bowed as he raised his left arm to the sky.

The prisoner veered to avoid them.

A tremor ran through the man's raised arm and then his entire body was trembling, his teeth gritted from the effort of channeling raw power from beyond the veil of the world. *Here it comes*, Lukan thought. *Any moment now . . .*

A streak of turquoise sorcery shot from the woman's hand, splitting the air with a crack as it lashed out like a whip, striking the fleeing prisoner in the face and sending him sprawling to the ground. The crowd roared. The youth managed to climb to one knee, but fell back into the dirt as the lash hovered over him, tensed as if ready to strike. It was only then that Lukan realized the tip of the lash resembled a snake's head, eyes glowing yellow above bared fangs. *Damned gleamers. Everything's a game to them.*

The prisoner remained on the ground, one arm raised against the hovering lash, until a pair of guards dragged him roughly to his feet. He offered no further resistance as he was marched back toward the Bone Pit. The female gleamer smirked and closed her fist, the turquoise snake dissipating like smoke. She said something over her shoulder to her brother, who nodded and lowered his arm, his posture relaxing as he severed his connection to whatever otherworldly powers he was drawing on. Still holding hands, the twins strolled after the re-formed rank of Keepers, apparently indifferent to the approving roar of the crowd.

Flea turned to him, her eyes wide. “Did you *see* that?”

“I saw it.” *And I’ll bet it was barely a glimpse of what they can do.*

Perhaps chagrined by their failure to control the prisoners, the guards set about their next task with renewed energy, pushing the three prisoners into position before the bones and fastening the iron collars round their necks and manacles round their wrists. Satisfied they were secure, the guards left the platform. The Constanza twins took up a position about ten yards away, while the seven Keepers stood in a line a short distance behind them. A hush fell over the arena as the purple-robed figure of Corruption stepped forward and raised a conical device to the mouth of her mask, which resembled a smirking face adorned by a crown set at a crooked angle—a nod, perhaps, to the abuses of power that had eventually brought down the Amberléne Empire several centuries before.

“Good citizens of Saphrona,” she said, her voice echoing around the arena. “These three prisoners have violated our city’s sacred laws. The Lady of Seven Shadows demands justice. Will you bear witness as one of them gives their life to atone for their sins?”

“*We will bear witness,*” the crowd roared as one.

“Then heed the names and crimes of the condemned.” The Keeper pointed to the young man. “Gallias Savanos, clerk of the first rank at the Trade Council, has invoked the Sixth Shadow of Corruption. He broke his oath of service and abused his position of authority to steal sensitive information, which he then sold to foreign powers, thus undermining the safety and security of our city. A debt must be paid.”

The youth shook his head and tried to speak, but his plea of innocence was lost beneath the roar of the crowd. Corruption handed the speaking horn to Deceit, who wore a yellow robe and a mask featuring a pointed chin and ridiculously long nose, which reminded Lukan of a pantomime villain. The Keeper raised the horn to his lips and pointed at the older man.

“Antillas Karza, customs official, has invoked the Fifth Shadow

of Deceit. He falsified hundreds of documents, which allowed the import of illegal narcotics into our city. A debt must be paid.”

The man flinched as the crowd roared again, his head bowed.

Bloodlust stepped forward to stand beside Corruption and Deceit, accepting the horn from the latter. He raised the device to the lips of his demonic mask and pointed at Zandrusa.

“Lady Saïda Jelassi, merchant prince and formerly an esteemed member of the Gilded Council, has invoked the First Shadow of Bloodlust,” he intoned in a deep voice. “She murdered Lord Saviola, a fellow merchant prince and council member, in cold blood. A debt must be paid.”

The crowd had clearly reserved most of their ire for the former merchant prince; the cacophony that followed was almost deafening. If only one of the three prisoners was to die that morning, it was clear who the popular choice was. Zandrusa, for her part, appeared unmoved—unlike her fellow prisoners, she stood up straight, chin raised, face impassive. *A guilty woman accepting her fate?* Lukan wondered. *Or an innocent woman determined to keep her dignity?* If Zandrusa survived what was to come, perhaps he would find out. Yet if she died here, right before his eyes, well . . . that would be the end of everything. Whatever link Zandrusa had to his father would forever remain a mystery. *As will the identity of my father’s murderer.* Lukan clenched a fist in frustration. Never before had something so important to him been so completely out of his hands.

“Here come the drummers,” Flea said, as twenty men and women—immaculate in outfits of black and gold—filed into the amphitheater in two columns, large drums resting on their hips. They made their way to the Bone Pit and formed a circle around the platform, some of them looking less than delighted to be so close to the prisoners. *I don’t blame them,* Lukan thought. *If half of what Flea has said is true, I wouldn’t want to be standing there either.*

The crimson-robed figure of Bloodlust stepped forward from the line of Keepers and raised the speaking horn to his mask once again.

“Three debts must be paid,” the Keeper intoned. “But only one of the condemned will today be granted the honor of offering their life to the Lady of Seven Shadows. She will decide.”

“*She will decide,*” the crowd echoed as Bloodlust rejoined the line of Keepers.

Silence fell, weighed down by a collective anticipation that stole the breath from Lukan’s lungs.

For several moments nothing happened.

Then the large bronze seal at the center of the platform began to move, sliding sideways into a hidden recess, revealing the darkness beneath. The low rumble of its movement was drowned out as the crowd began a chant, which rose in volume as the hole—the *pit*—grew steadily wider. As the seal finally disappeared from view, the crowd cheered even louder than before. Lukan felt almost dizzy as he glanced at the prisoners. The youth was gaping at the pit in wide-eyed terror, while the older man’s shoulders shook as he sobbed. Zandrusa remained still, staring straight ahead.

Then the drums started—slow at first, like the booming of a huge, unseen clock, counting down the final moments of the prisoners’ lives. A hush fell over the crowd as the tempo quickened, until the only sound was the drumbeat echoing around the amphitheater. Each pounding beat drove the anxiety in Lukan’s gut a little closer to his throat. Movement caught his eyes: the Constanza twins, adopting the same position they had taken earlier—the sister in front, arm outstretched and fingers spread wide, her brother behind with his left arm raised. Both gleamers ready to unleash their sorcery against . . . what?

Yet Lukan already knew. He’d known from the moment when Flea had told him the night before, even if he’d refused to believe it. Now, as he stared at the prisoners chained around the pit, as his heart pounded in time to the drumbeat—and as he felt a series of subtle tremors in the stone beneath him—he finally admitted what he’d known all along. *Flea wasn’t joking. Lady’s mercy . . .* He wanted to close his eyes, but instead he stared at the pit, unable to look away.



“Here she comes,” Flea shouted.

The monster rose from the darkness, a nightmare slipping into the waking world. To Lukan’s eyes it had the look of a worm, though in truth it was as close to a worm as a wolf was to a puppy. He watched, speechless, as the huge creature emerged from the depths of the pit, a primal force that had somehow outlived the age that had witnessed its birth. It moved slowly, its elongated body twisting upward with a languor born from being a predator without equal.

A predator that no longer even needed to hunt.

The drumbeat faltered, then died as the drummers backed away, terror flitting across their faces. A ragged cheer swelled around the amphitheater as the crowd found its voice. The worm’s tan-colored body arched in response to the sound, a series of wicked black spines protruding from the carapace along its back. Sand and dirt spilled from the creature’s huge tusks as it turned its massive head in different directions. *Trying to pinpoint the sound*, Lukan realized as his initial shock receded. *Damned thing must be blind.*

“Gargantua,” Flea shouted, practically bouncing with excitement.

“Gargantua?” he echoed, glancing at the girl.

“That’s her name.”

“Her? How do you know it’s—”

“Just watch!”

The creature—Gargantua—didn’t seem to have detected the three potential meals on offer, despite two of them doing their utmost to be noticed. The youth was shaking, lips quivering as he mouthed a frantic prayer, while the older man was busy pissing himself, chest heaving as he gasped lungfuls of air. Zandrusa remained still as a statue, her tensed jaw and flaring nostrils the only sign of the terror she must have felt as she stared up at the worm.

Gargantua snapped forward, quick as a whip, but not down toward one of the prisoners—instead she surged upward.

“Lady’s blood,” Lukan whispered, half rising. “It’s going to escape—”

A muted crack split the air like distant thunder. The worm recoiled as if struck, and a web of turquoise light flickered into existence: a glowing latticework of sorcery, shaped like a dome, that enclosed the entire pit and the three prisoners. After a moment it faded from sight. *The gleamers*, Lukan realized, glancing over to their position. If either of the twins felt any pressure at being the solitary barrier that was preventing the worm escaping and smashing the amphitheater into dust, they certainly weren't showing it. The woman even wore a small smile as her fingers weaved invisible threads in the air. He shook his head in disbelief. *Arrogant bastards.*

"Sit *down*," Flea said, rolling her eyes as she pulled him back onto the bench.

Perhaps spurred on by the crowd's jeers, Gargantua tried again, this time lunging in a different direction. Once more she recoiled at the sound of distant thunder, the web flickering briefly before fading once more. The creature made three more attempts, each more frenzied than the last.

Each time it was forced back by the gleamers' sorcery.

Seemingly enraged by her failure, Gargantua threw back her head and emitted a bass roar that momentarily drowned out the noise of the crowd, her jaws splaying open like the petals of a flower to reveal a gaping, circular mouth filled with countless rows of needlelike teeth. The creature drew back, preparing for another attempt at the invisible barrier.

Then she paused.

With an agonizing slowness, Gargantua turned toward the youth, who was still sobbing uncontrollably, half suspended in his chains, his knees having given way. The worm tilted her great head, as if listening. *Or sensing the vibrations*, Lukan thought, recalling how some snakes hunted by feeling the movement of their prey. *No wonder Zandrusa is doing her best to remain still.*

The youth looked up, as if realizing for the first time that he was the subject of the worm's attention. *Take him*, Lukan silently urged the creature. He felt a rush of guilt at wishing death on the

boy, but Zandrusa *had* to survive, and if that meant the boy had to die in her place then so be it. Yet as he watched the boy quaking before the worm's maw, he couldn't help but feel that nobody deserved an end like this—certainly not for the crime of selling trade secrets.

Perhaps the Lady herself agreed, for the worm swung away from the boy and instead focused on the older man, who started thrashing in his chains, eyes bright with terror.

"Come on," Lukan murmured under his breath, feeling no less guilt at hoping for the man's death. *Put the poor bastard out of his misery and end this charade.* For a moment it seemed the worm might oblige; she leaned in close to the man, who screamed and turned his face away, flailing hopelessly in his chains. Lukan held his breath as the worm drew back, body curling as if readying to strike . . . only to twist round in a languid movement. *No*, Lukan thought, panic rising. *No, no, no.*

He watched helplessly as Gargantua moved toward Zandrusa.

A roar rippled around the arena at this unexpected turn of events. People surged to their feet, cheering. "Take her!" someone screamed, their voice shrill above the din. "Take the prince!" Others took up the chant, which quickly spread through the crowd. *Take the prince! Take the prince! Take the prince!*

Zandrusa remained unmoved. Lukan couldn't help but admire her in that moment, this stranger he didn't even know—a woman who might even be his father's murderer. She didn't scream, didn't flail in her chains, didn't glance up at the sky and plead for divine intervention. Instead she set her jaw and stared defiantly up at the worm as she loomed over her, looking her death in the eye.

The chanting tailed off, the crowd falling into quiet anticipation. Lukan didn't dare to breathe. All of his hopes rested on this moment—on the whims of this ancient creature, who had been tasked with carrying out the will of a god.

It was so absurd he could have laughed.

Gargantua turned her great head from side to side, as if somehow appraising Zandrusa. The merchant prince tensed as the

creature leaned toward her, yet still she refused to look away, her expression as firm and unyielding as stone.

The creature drew back, powerful body arching. Preparing to lunge.

Time slowed, leaving Lukan with an image that he knew would always be imprinted on his mind: the spine-laden curve of Gargantua's back as she reared upward, the final defiance of Zandrusa even as the shadow of her death fell upon her. Lukan almost looked away, wanting to ignore the final act of this charade that passed for justice. Instead he kept his eyes on the merchant prince. Whatever the woman's link to his father, he felt an obligation to watch her final moments.

The worm moved with a speed that belied her size, head snapping down, jaws widening to reveal the rows of teeth within . . . only to twist away at the last moment and lunge at the older man instead. He didn't even have time to scream as the creature's jaws ripped him from his chains.

It was over in less than a heartbeat.

Gargantua straightened, a ripple passing down her length as she swallowed the unfortunate prisoner before turning back toward Zandrusa. Yet her task—whether the creature knew it or not—was done. The female gleamer weaved a complex pattern with her fingers, as if plucking a harp, and the cage of turquoise light materialized once more—smaller in radius this time, encompassing just the pit itself. The worm lunged at Zandrusa, who stood on the other side of the sorcerous barrier.

The cage flickered but held.

Gargantua roared as the cage grew smaller, throwing herself against the mesh of sorcery even as she was forced back down into the pit. The woman's smile never faltered, though Lukan noted her brother was sweating freely, teeth bared as his body shook from the energies that were coursing through him.

With a final bellow, Gargantua disappeared. The cage shrank until it covered the pit like a sorcerous spider's web, then descended

into the darkness. As the bronze disc slid back into place, the male gleamer fell to one knee, exhausted from his efforts.

It was over.

The yellow-robed figure of Deceit stepped forward and raised the speaking horn. "A debt has been paid," he said, his voice echoing around the amphitheater. This time there was no answering cry from the crowd; it was as if their lust for violence and death had now been sated. "Go with the Lady's grace." The figure lowered the horn and as one the seven Keepers turned, heading for the gates without so much as a glance at the two remaining prisoners. The youth all but collapsed into the arms of the guards as they freed him from his collar and manacles. Zandrusa needed no such assistance.

"What happens to them now?" Lukan asked Flea as the prisoners were led away, Zandrusa staring in the direction of the merchant princes' enclosure.

"They'll be taken back to the Hand," Flea replied. "Then they'll do this all over again."

"Again? When?"

"Ten days from now."

"So Zandrusa will have to face that . . . *thing* again?"

"And the boy too." Flea nodded. "There will be a new prisoner as well, to replace the one that got eaten."

Lukan shook his head. *Lady's blood*. "So it's just a stay of execution then," he said, his relief at Zandrusa's survival fading. "Nothing more than a reprieve."

"A what?"

"Never mind." He rubbed the stubble on his jaw, brow creased in thought. "So they just keep bringing each prisoner back, then? Until the worm finally takes them?"

"Yeah, though people say if you survive seven times the Keepers set you free."

*How generous of them*. "You ever seen that happen?"

The girl shook her head. "I saw a woman who survived five

times, but the worm ate her the sixth time.” She shrugged. “There’re stories of prisoners who survived and were released, but they were all a long time ago.”

They sat in silence for a while as the people around them headed toward the exits, talking and laughing as if they’d just watched a comedy performance rather than a horrifying execution.

“So,” Lukan said eventually, “if Zandrusa has got ten days until she’s back down there, that means I’ve got ten days to try and talk to her.”

“*Talk* to her?” Flea said, giving him a withering look. “She’s going to be in the *Hand*. It’s like . . . one of the most guarded places in the city. You’ll never get inside.”

Lukan stole one of her grapes and popped it into his mouth. “Let me worry about that.”