



EPILOGUE



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Hard and unforgiving, the sun beat down over the arena. As the day had worn on, it had warmed the bleached walls until they were too hot to touch and baked the surrounding jungle until the air above the trees simmered, anything beyond the threshold a murky haze.

The inhospitable heat did little to diminish the crowds' enthusiasm. Each figure was tanned from many such days, and their faces were flushed not only from the heat, but also the bloodlust of the spectacle before them. As one, they ignored their burning flesh and screamed at the top of their lungs, bellowing at the desperate plight of the souls below, in the sandy pit.

Each fighter was armoured like a gladiator of old, snatches of chainmail and sections of interlocking plates only partially covering their bodies, to leave the rest exposed and unprotected. They were armed with a selection of barbaric weapons, spotted with rust as well as bloodstains new and old.

The people in the arena warily watched each other with cold eyes, most wearing faces that had long since given up any sense of joy, and now knew only viciousness. Several of their number had already fallen, expanding pools of crimson staining the sand beneath them.

The lucky ones were still. Those less fortunate screamed in agony. Even in their torment, they did not cry out for the aid they knew would not come.

High atop the stands, sitting in his grandiose throne, the ruler of this violent place watched the melee unfold with interest. Barely visible after so many games, he

could only faintly make out the familiar circular badge painted onto the arena floor. He alone had brought the game to the shores of the new world, this wild and untamed frontier, entirely unknown by any in the Empire of the Free Cities.

Here it would be reborn.

In the pit, a wiry woman gutted another gladiator with a wicked trident, twisting the blades and unleashing a spray of blood, before pulling it free. The baying crowds screamed her name in excitement.

A smile fixed across his lips, under his bristles. Rage like hers was something he knew all too well. The tyrant let his cigar fall from his lips, stamping it into the sandstone with his boot.

The silent curse was with him no longer.

He had created this savage dominion, and his blackened heart had found home once more.

