

## November

It was a cool morning when Nails arrived at the Pit for his next training and bout session. Or rather it had been a cool morning in Ylelon. So far as Nails could tell the temperature in the Pit was a constant and there didn't seem to be anything like a cycle of day and night. Events in the arena followed a continuous, unbroken schedule, while the hours kept by resident merchants and businesses seemed tailored to the whims of those operating them, independent of any others. Nails supposed that the Pit was tethered to so many worlds that trying to keep a synchronized schedule with any number of them was a futile gesture. He also wondered if this might not also be an expression of the Arbiter's libertarian ideals: make your own way in the Pit, as long as you follow a few basic rules.

None of it mattered, really. Today Nails had his mind on only one thing: some very intense training. When he had returned to Ylelon after his last training session, the others had greeted him with wild-eyed looks and horrified accounts of what had happened in his absence. The recovery and loss of the Kad followed by Terek Domar's destruction of another dragon--it was a lot to take in. George, Jake and Will all seemed certain that the struggle between Terek Domar and Atla was close to a violent end. If that was the case, then Nails wanted to be prepared for whatever might come their way. That meant getting as much training as he could squeeze out of his visits to the Pit. With no day/night cycle to follow Nails counted the hours until his next trip and this time he had been counting them eagerly.

After checking in with the gate guards Nails went directly to his quarters. Anxious to train or not, he still took a few moments to sample the contents of the fruit bowl in the living room. Then it was off to the White Room.

Nineteen hours later he emerged covered in countless fading wounds, gashes, claw marks, bullet holes and burns, his clothing hanging off his body in tattered rags. After changing into fresh clothes he marched with purpose to the Arbiter's booth.

The Arbiter jumped in his seat, startled by a sudden pounding on his booth's door. With an annoyed grimace he motioned for a nearby servant to investigate. No sooner had the man laid a hand on one door handle than Nails hauled the door open and walked into the booth.

"Hello again," said the Arbiter sardonically. "I see you're adjusting to your star status."

"I came by to set up my next match," Nails said, snagging a handful of cheese cubes from a plate on the buffet table.

"Which you can do with any of the registrars."

Nails scowled. "Last time I was here you didn't have a problem with me coming here directly."

"You never know the Prima Donnas at the start," the Arbiter muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." The Arbiter's control slab appeared before him and he began to tap away at it. "I have your next match made. It's an entry-level fight, but it should cover your costs. Be back here in two hours. Oh, it's to the death."

Nails stopped in mid-chew. "I would thank that after the incident with the little girl you would know better than to joke like that." A nearby servant moved slightly further away from him.

"Relax, it's just terminology. You'll be fighting an automaton you should have no trouble with, so 'to the death' in this case means 'you break it into tiny bits.' A kill. Get it?"

"Fine." Nails walked onto the balcony, still popping samples of cheese into his mouth. "Look, I'm sorry about barging in, I really thought it was ok to come to you directly. From now on I'll go to the registrars and..."

His words died in his mouth as he looked into the arena. On the bare slate floor below a hulking brute Nails would have aptly described as an ogre was locked in combat with a stunningly beautiful woman. The lummoX swung a massive club again and again in huge arcs that the woman deftly avoided, each time springing forward to pummel her opponent with kicks and some kind of tonfa-like weapon before gracefully avoiding another clumsy swing.

"Who is that?" Nails wondered aloud.

“The woman?” the Arbiter said. “I think her stage name is Desert Autumn. She’s one of the odalisques of Bey Voshomin.”

“Who?”

“Big wealthy customer, royalty on some world or other. He gets off on bringing his harem girls and servants in here and watching them fight. Autumn’s just one of the few good enough to be able to make return visits, if you follow me.”

“You have charming clientele,” Nails said.

“You’re paying for the use of my White Rooms.”

“Touché.”

In the pit below Desert Autumn ducked a swing of the club, leapt and broke the ogre’s jaw with a high kick. The brute dropped his weapon as he recoiled, whereupon Autumn sprang on him from behind and wrapped her arms around his neck in a chokehold. Very quickly the ogre’s face changed color to match his swollen purple jaw. He grasped at her arms and struggled to pull her off of himself, but his flailing grew weak and in moments he toppled to the floor unconscious.

Desert Autumn stood on the ogre’s back and struck victory poses for the sparse crowd. She was tall, slender, athletic, with remarkable brass-colored skin, bronze hair, golden eyes. Every movement of her toned dancer’s form was poetic, dazzling. Nails thought, with a nervous swallow, that it was not hard to believe this woman was an odalisque. Sometime after that he realized he was looking very intently at her legs.

“So, uh,” he said and tried to clear his throat, an awkward moment for one without saliva, “back in two hours?”

“Two hours,” the Arbiter said. “Do knock next time, all right?”

In two hours’ time Nails found himself standing in the arena, trying to make sense of what he was looking at. His opponent was a bizarre conglomeration of springs, wheels, gears and cogs assembled in a haphazard imitation of a humanoid form. Every piece moved continuously, shifting about as individuals and in conjoined groups, rearranging the form of the thing in an endless spree of clockwork chaos.

The Arbiter rang the gong. The whatever-it-was-supposed-to-be shambled forward, clattering like a cart full of scrap and swung one amorphous limb at Nails in a hopelessly clumsy attack.

Nails struck the arm aside and several pieces broke loose and fell to the floor. Nails grimaced: could any design so lacking in foresight of applied intelligence really be meant to be any sort of threat? As he pulverized the empty shell of the thing’s head, he mostly felt annoyance that the Arbiter would waste his time with anything so pathetic. In seconds he reduced the automaton to scattered bits.

“So, what was that about?” Nails asked as he leaned against the Arbiter’s chair. “Don’t get me wrong, I know the fights are part of the deal, but that thing was a waste of my time.”

“Of course it was. The chaos clockwork was a waste of everyone’s time,” the Arbiter said. “Do you remember the Lord Yepp?”

“Who, that beggar guy you gave a concussion to a while back?”

“That’s the one. The scrapheap you just dismantled was one of that idiot’s clients. You get training paid for by an easy fight, I get rid of one more irritation that should never have been allowed to exist. Simple as that.”

“Are you going to use me for all your petty revenge?” Nails asked wryly.

“I’ll use anyone I can for my petty revenge.”

“Hmph. At least you’re honest.”

“It’s what I do.”

## February

Come the later days of Ylelon’s winter that year Nails returned to the Pit for what had become regular visits. The apocalyptic ending to what Jake had taken to calling the “Truce War” had not come: in

fact, the Winds' patrols in the city had become increasingly uneventful. Will described the situation as similar to the quiet leading up to the previous September.

None of that made any difference to Nails. He felt that he was making good progress with the marathon training sessions and saw the relative quiet as an opportunity to continue them without feeling like he was abandoning his friends to perilous times.

On that occasion, after almost fifty uninterrupted hours of training, Nails awaited his obligatory match in one of the preparation rooms around the arena. He heard the echo of the gong signaling the end of the previous fight and started walking toward the gate in the distance. To his mild surprise, the gate opened and a lone figure approached them from the arena. As Nails came closer he saw, with a slight pang of nervousness, that it was Desert Autumn.

Nails had now seen her fight on several occasions in the past few months but had never encountered her in person. Her outfit was different for every bout, always something designed to exhibit her beauty at the expense of protection. Nails loathed the practice, knowing that this remarkable fighter was a slave performing for a deviant somewhere in the Pit, but at the same time he often caught himself lingering in looking at her.

Desert Autumn walked down the corridor with a confident and graceful gait, light on her feet. Nails tried very hard to give her a look of nothing more or less than polite acknowledgement. Their eyes met and in that instant, Nails saw something that surprised him. There was the slightest moment of unease, of hesitation in Autumn's walk. It was the briefest of changes of pace, but to Nails's heightened perception it was quite noticeable and he was afraid he had offended her somehow.

"Hi," he said with a slight wave. He then immediately berated himself for being the most pathetic thing in the history of every world.

Desert Autumn stopped and smiled. "Hello!" she said pleasantly. "It's an honor to meet you."

Nails felt his heart jump, which confused him as he had no heart. "Pardon me?"

"You're tearing up the higher leagues. All of the girls in the seraglio are big fans of yours."

"The Sara-what?"

"The Bey's harem."

"Oh, yeah. Right." Nails was now sure he was blushing, which led in turn to him wondering just how many physiologically impossible responses this woman was capable of provoking in him. He wisely curbed that line of thought. "That's pretty flattering. I didn't think I had many fans."

"You're joking!" laughed Desert Autumn. "The Pit loves you! Don't you check the forum?"

"The Pit has a forum?"

"Of course. An online forum is one of the foremost signs of a decadent society, right after blood sports. It's a sociological benchmark."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but that's a pretty brainy thing to hear from a pit fighter."

"You understood it."

"Touché. Wait, how did you know I understood you?"

"Body language."

"You can read body language?"

"Of course. I'm an odalisque. It comes in handy."

For fear of saying the wrong thing Nails shifted the subject. "So, the fans like me?"

"A lot of the forums do, yeah. The harem watches your fight videos constantly, too."

"They...do?"

"Oh, yeah. Rooms full of healthy women who aren't allowed to even be around men? Your fights are on their regular watch lists."

Now Nails *knew* he was blushing.

"Anyway, I won't keep you from your engagement," said Desert Autumn with a wink. "See you around!"

Once again, Nails caught himself staring as Desert Autumn turned and walked away down the tunnel.

Nails's fight was nothing spectacular. In fact, it was so mundane that he all but sleepwalked through it. The Arbiter, in his seemingly bottomless appetite to repay slights against himself, had taken to including Nails in a series of exhibition matches devoted solely to humiliating the Lord Yepp's clients. Today it was the other one, a muscle-bound dunderhead that imagined himself an invincible barbarian warrior. The fool called himself "Stampede," which had inspired Nails's habit of subduing him by dropping him with a single punch and stomping the daylights out of him. This routine always left Nails plenty of time to think. Doubtless you will not be surprised to be told that on this occasion he thought primarily of Desert Autumn.

Embarrassment aside, Nails had been genuinely flattered to learn that he was a fan favorite in the Pit. With so many talented and exotic warriors represented there it had never seemed realistic to him to expect to have a crowd of swooning female fans...not that he hadn't secretly hoped for it.

Still, it was kind of cool to have such an exceptional fighter as Desert Autumn express appreciation for his ability. It wasn't only Autumn's physical beauty that Nails had admired these past few months. He had seen her come unscathed out of more than one fight he expected her to be seriously injured in, or at least closer to it than most people would have any right to be given the odds she tended to face. Powerful warriors, two- or three-to-one odds--the woman had real talent as a fighter, but she was taking some serious risks proving it.

Then Nails had an idea. Even though he knew nothing about Autumn's situation, she seemed to spend a great deal of time at the Pit. If Nails really was some kind of minor celebrity, then maybe Desert Autumn would be interested in joining him for a few training sessions. It would be an excuse to see her again, not to mention breaking the tedium of his solo exercises. Maybe if all went well she would even teach him some of what she--

"What the hell are you doing?" The Arbiter's voice startled Nails from his reverie. He turned and found the pudgy little man standing a few feet away from him.

"Arbiter? What are you doing down here?"

"I'm not there. This is a projection only those on the pit floor can see," the Arbiter said. "You stopped trampling the fool and you're just staring into space. Get on with it!"

"Fine," Nails growled and kicked the sputtering Stampede in the head, rendering him unconscious. "Happy?"

"Not really. Didn't you get my memo for this fight? I wanted you to kill him."

"I didn't get any memo and *I thought we'd gone over this.*"

"Relax, I'm just stepping up my annoying of Yepp. It'll cost him a fortune to get his pet idiot rezzed."

"Come again?"

"Resurrection magic. It's used here all the time, but it's exorbitantly expensive."

"You have magic that can bring the dead *back to life*?" Nails said, mouth agape.

"Oh, sure. It even works...most of the time," the Arbiter said through a wicked grin.

"Forget it, paunchy. I'll pummel helpless idiots to pay my way here, but I don't commit murder for you or anyone else!"

"Oh, fine. Just clear the arena, then," the Arbiter grumbled and vanished.

Nails begrudgingly complied by dragging the unconscious Stampede out of the arena by his ankle but by the time he was leaving his opponent in one of the preparation rooms he was smiling again, already thinking about Desert Autumn.

For five days every two weeks like clockwork Nails returned to the Pit. After the occasion when he spoke to Desert Autumn in the tunnel Nails composed the most official-sounding letter he could and gave it to one of the arena registrars with the request that it be sent to the Bey's private apartments. When the registrar took the letter unceremoniously Nails was simultaneously relieved that such correspondence was apparently acceptable and tense with anticipation about what might happen when--or if--it were answered.

When Nails returned after an eventful two weeks in Ylelon he experienced a new height of

nervous expectation. A messenger came to his apartment shortly after his arrival and presented a neatly-folded letter sealed with wax. Nails waited until the messenger had departed before opening the letter, which was script in a florid feminine hand:

To the Esteemed Warrior Nails,

My master was most gratified to receive your compliment to his household by requesting my presence at your training sessions. It is my pleasure to inform you that the Bey has graciously allowed for his property to join you that I may benefit in learning from your superior prowess and thereby please my lord further.

If it pleases your lordship, prepare your household for the arrival of myself and my escort at the time listed below. May your strength never fail and your victories be endless.

The letter ended with a time late the next day and was signed by Desert Autumn. Nails calmly refolded the paper, laid it aside, and sprang into the air with a triumphant shout.

### March

The body of the last raider smacked against the battlement and fell limply onto the walkway. In a flash Desert Autumn rushed to his side and buried the massive head of her spear in his heart. The raggedly-garbed brigand cried out shrilly and was still

“This side’s clear!” Autumn shouted.

From his place atop the opposite wall Nails waved his acknowledgement before tossing the struggling raider he was holding by the neck over the side. He then flew quickly to Autumn.

“We’ve got less than a minute before the next wave hits us,” Autumn said, pointing at the rocky foothills beyond the reach of the tiny fort. Numerous figures were making their way over the rough terrain in the harsh afternoon sun.

“I’ll get the gates,” Nails said. With a single leap he crossed the distance between the walkway and the two doors of the front gate, which had been left standing wide open after the last wave of brigands had forced their way in. Normally it would take three strong men to close either half of the gate: Nails slung each one closed with one hand. The locking beam had been broken in the last assault, so Nails searched for a way to replace it. An empty cart and some heavy barrels were the best he could find and he could already head the shouts of the approaching raiders as he flung the refuse against the gate in a crude barricade.

No sooner had he finished than an impact shook the gates. The raiders outside hammered at the sturdy barrier, but the refuse pile held fast. That left the walls, where crude lassos and hooks were already being thrown upward to find holds among the battlements. Desert Autumn was covering her wall, slicing through the ropes with her spear, sending climbers plunging to the ground below. As Nails sped along the other walls, tearing ropes free, he couldn’t help but once again admire Autumn’s form. Not her physical beauty--though Nails had certainly spent plenty of time admiring that, as well--but her technique in combat. Autumn was swift, precise and lethal. There was none of the showmanship of the style she used in the arena, flashy and made to entertain, in action here. This was pure efficiency, a style purely intended to end a fight as quickly as possible. Over the last few weeks the Bey had allowed his odalisque to train with Nails under the auspice that she was learning from him, but the truth was that he was learning far more from her.

“How much longer does this program last?” Nails called over the shrieks of artificial men falling helplessly.

“At the rate we’re going? About fifteen minutes,” Autumn shouted back.

An hour and a half later when the program ended Nails and Desert Autumn staggered out of the

White Room dusty and worn. Autumn's spear was notched in many places, her clothing drenched in sweat.

"I'm really sorry," she was saying. "I didn't expect the program to adjust so much for your level of ability."

"S'ok," Nails replied. "I think Ward was just expressing his weird sense of humor. I should have known something was off when the simple desert raiders started throwing exploding glow-in-the-dark flying disks. Really, Ward..."

"It's long past time to return." The speaker was a diminutive man in ridiculously ornate robes and a tall miter. He was sitting rigidly in one of Nails's chairs, holding a palm-sized cube of decoratively-wrought gold metal.

"Sorry, Tep. As I'm sure you saw," Nails said with a nod toward the object in the man's hand, "the scenario didn't go quite like we thought it would. You'll explain to His Excellency that no disrespect was intended, won't you?"

"And offer recompense and proper supplications as necessary," Desert Autumn prompted.

"Right, that," said Nails.

Tep stood, set the cube down on a nearby end table and walked directly into Nails's personal space. "I will tell Bey Voshomin exactly what happened, nothing more or less. Where you are again allowed to abuse his trust will be his decision."

"Oh. I see," Nails said. "In that case, I, uh, hope to see you again soon."

Tep turned and walked stiffly to the front door. Desert Autumn dutifully followed, but she did wonders for Nails's optimism by looking back over her shoulder and winking.

When the major domo and the odalisque were gone, Nails took a moment to sample some fruit, then went back into the White Room.

Tep and Desert Autumn returned the next day. Tep had little to say on the subject beyond that the Bey found no fault in anything he was told. With a disapproving grunt the little man sat in his chair with the viewing cube and waited.

Now, Autumn and Nails made their way through a sweltering jungle. Nails had no idea what they were looking for, but he was more than happy to follow Autumn's lead.

"So, what's your real name?" the seraglio girl asked suddenly.

"What?"

"You know, your actual name. Unless you want me to believe that you really are named for slivers of metal used to secure boards."

"I guess it must lose something in the translation," Nails said as he ducked a low branch. "It has a connotation of toughness in my language. My real name is David."

"'Beloved.' I like it. Much less off-putting than 'Nails.'"

"Yeah, I've been told that."

They came to a steady incline and began to climb. Somewhere in the distance a bird made a trilling cry.

"So?" Autumn asked.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to ask me what my real name is?"

"Ok. What is it?"

"It's Desert Autumn," the odalisque said with a coy smile. "Thanks for asking."

"It's pretty," Nails said. "Do your people usually have poetic names?"

"Not in my native culture. This is the name I was given when my parents sold me to the seraglio."

If Nails had been drinking anything at that moment he would have spit it out. "Your *parents* sold you to be a sex slave?"

Desert Autumn stopped and turned to face him. Her expression made Nails immediately regret his choice of words.

"My father was hopelessly indebted to the Bey. I was the only...thing of value that he had to

offer,” Autumn said. “Yes, it’s sad, but I don’t begrudge my parents’ decision. They did what they had to do. And I am NOT a sex slave!” She turned and marched away.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Nails said as he jogged to catch up to her. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s all right. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I suppose I’m too sensitive about the subject.”

“About what? Being a--being an odalisque?”

“Explaining this to everyone never gets tiresome, either,” grumbled Autumn. “An odalisque is *not* a sex slave. I’m not one of the Bey’s wives, either. Technically, I’m a slave of his wives.”

“Then why do you fight in the arena?”

“In a normal seraglio, the odalisques remain virgins until they are judged worthy to be brought before the master. If she “impresses” him enough or bears him a son, she becomes one of his wives. But my master doesn’t care to test me in his bed. His pleasure comes in seeing his women fighting, win or lose. He prefers when we lose.” Nails could hear the revulsion in Autumn’s voice and shared in it.

“Is there any way you can ever be free?” he asked.

“It doesn’t work that way. So far as the laws of our land are concerned I’m his personal property and he enjoys watching me fight too much to let me go. Hell, if it weren’t for the Arbiter’s obsession with leagues and “fair fights” the Bey would have tossed me in the arena with twenty opponents long ago, just to watch them beat me to death.” She shuddered.

“I’m sorry,” Nails said. “I wish I could help.”

“You do help,” said Desert Autumn quietly. “I’ve...not had many chances for friendship in my life. Spending time with someone I can really talk to, who doesn’t order me around, ogle me or try to kill me? The time I’ve spent with you has been some of the best of my entire life.”

“Thank you,” Nails said.

“No. Thank *you*.”

It was not long before they came to their mission objective, a guerrilla camp preparing to attack an unarmed settlement nearby. The two warriors demolished the camp, Nails descending on them like the wrath of God, Desert autumn striking from surprise with lethal precision. Nails now thought he understood why Autumn played to the crowd in the arena but in the quasi-privacy of the White Room she struck so fiercely at simulacra that screamed and bled like men.

After Desert Autumn’s training session that day Tep escorted her back to the seraglio before going to the Bey’s private quarters. Huge men with padded armor and swords admitted him through ornate doors while silk-garbed servants scurried about on their errands.

The Bey himself was lounging on a great couch in one of his bed chambers being hand-fed from a cheese tray by two servants. When he saw his major domo entering the room he waved the girls away with one pudgy hand laden by gaudy rings.

“Your Excellency, we must speak,” Tep said.

“Must we? Really?” said the Bey. Tep often thought that his lord could sound more bored and disinterested than any other man alive.

“Indeed. Your seraglio servant, Desert Autumn, continues to speak disrespectfully of you and unfaithfully of her station. The outsider Nails is a corrupting influence.”

“He is nothing of the sort, Tep. If anything, he is helping to forge the girl into something more desirable.”

“What means your lordship?”

The Bey leaned his considerable bulk back on the couch. “Why do you think I allowed the girl to see him to begin with? Superior ability breeds superior goals.”

“You think she will take on greater challenges after her association with him,” Tep said thoughtfully.

“Naturally. It’s only a matter of time before she finally accepts a fight she cannot win and then, well, there are always more in the seraglio, aren’t there? Besides, she’s not getting any younger.

“Let her speak poorly of me. Let her dally with the warrior if it suits him, so long as it leads to her humiliation in the arena.”

“As you desire, your Excellency,” Tep said, bowed and left the room. He went to the entrance of the seraglio and sent for Desert Autumn, who came straight away. When Tep told her that her sessions with Nails would no longer be supervised she remained composed but smiled broadly as she returned to her chamber. As Tep went about his other duties he was smiling, too.

## April

“So there are more of him out there?” Autumn asking in the midst of a push-up.

Nails ducked under a fist-sized globe of light as it buzzed by his head. “Yeah, that’s what Cynthia said. Bunch of the damn things all over the world, from the sound of it.”

“And this Iron character? He really was going to have them execute you?”

“That sure seemed to be his plan.”

A dozen of the light globes dove at Nails from differing directions, but he evaded every one of them without moving from where he stood.

“That’s better, but you’re still too rigid,” Autumn said as she hopped back up onto her feet.

“Remember, flow like a wave.” She stood next to Nails and pointed at a light globe, which immediately flew at her. In one fluid motion she weaved away from it. “See?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Nails snapped his fingers, a sound like a dry branch cracking, and the swarm of lights dove at him again. This time his movements were more like Autumn’s, graceful, fluid motions rather than the formal choreography many people associated with combat motions.

“See? Good for sexy dancing and sexy fighting,” Autumn said with a smile.

“Definitely.”

“Nails?”

“Yes?”

“What would have happened to you? If the golems had killed you?”

Nails looked away from her. “I’ve told you. Rogziel said it would be oblivion for me.”

A wave of emotion ran across Autumn’s face, gone in a blink as her trained composure returned. “But that’s so *unfair*! It’s hideous! What sort of sadistic higher power would put you in a position to face your own destruction? To deny paradise to the sort of selfless person who deserves it most?”

“My family needed me,” Nails said almost apologetically. “Other people need me now.”

“What’s what I’m talking about! If those people die, there’s one of a thousand afterlives the scholars argue about waiting for them, but if you die protecting them you face *annihilation*?” Desert Autumn’s eyes were brimming with tears now.

“I’ve never claimed to understand it. I just try to do the right thing.”

“But what kind of Creator would ever put you in such a scenario to begin with? What sort of sadistic trickster would enlist a real hero to place himself in such utter peril?”

“Maybe one in desperate need of a real hero but willing to settle for me,” Nails said with a shrug. Desert Autumn hit him in the chest.

“Damn it, I’m serious! I can’t stand the thought of something happening to you...” She turned away from him and said something quiet that Nails could not hear.

“What was that?”

“I said, I would wait for you. If anything ever happened to me--”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m a big girl, Nails! I’m older than you are! I accepted the reality of my life a long time ago. So should you. I was sold to be a sex slave and the only reason I’m not is that my master would get more pleasure from watching me dying fighting than by touching me.

“Maybe someday he’ll get what he wants. I don’t know what will happen to me then. Maybe I’ll find myself standing under some great marble arch on the edge of paradise, like the priests back home say. If I do, I’ll wait for you there. Under the arch, watching whole worlds passing through. Just to make sure you get there safely.”

She was really crying now. Nails hated seeing it, knowing what she was saying and being unable

to cry with her, to show any real sign of connection or feeling. The only thing he could do was put his arms around her and hold her, feeling her warm tears soaking into his shirt.

“My Nails,” Autumn said. “My Beloved.”

## June

When Desert Autumn came to Nails’s apartment for the first training session of the month he was waiting for her with a surprise. He was even more excited to see her than usual, cautiously optimistic about what it might, just might, mean for them. Then there was a knock at the door, Nails opened it and his train of thought was completely derailed.

Desert Autumn had a surprise of her own in mind. Rather than her usual training leotard she had come wearing the silken scarves of a belly dancer. Under one arm she toted a large silver incense burner.

“Hi,” she said in a voice that could melt butter at twenty paces.

Nails attempted a reply, but the translator could not produce anything coherent from it. Desert Autumn took him by the hand and led him to his White Room. There she activated a program that recreated a pagoda from her home world. She lit some incense, placed it in the burner and began to dance.

Music emanated from the burner, a light but unpretentious tune of flutes and strings that played as the ash from the incense rose in tight streams that circled Desert Autumn as she danced. Her movements in dance were like those when she fought: smooth, beautiful, with the fluid grace that comes only when one has surpassed practice and mastery of a motion to the point of expertise that it has become second nature. Autumn’s dance was sensual, poetic, a work of art performed by a woman who was herself a work of art. Nails watched silently, savoring every moment.

“What do you think?” Autumn asked when the music ended and she was done.

“I’m supposed to form words after that?”

Desert Autumn laughed and kissed Nails. “I never get tired of teasing you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Hey, I’ve been practicing that dance for twenty-five years, I had to perform it sometime. How was your two weeks?”

“Excruciatingly long. I have something I’ve wanted to talk to you about. I’ve been talking with George--”

“No wonder you seem strained,” Autumn laughed.

“--and he thinks we may have the solution to your problem.”

Nails handed Autumn a hand-written letter, which she struggled to read for several moments.

“Does he always write like this?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah.”

“He has lovely penmanship, at least.” The more Autumn read, the more serious she looked. “Is this for real?”

“George thinks it is. The man likes to talk, but I swear he knows everything. He was pretty sure from what I’ve described of the Bey that he couldn’t resist an offer like this.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“Then we haven’t really lost anything, but at least we tried, right?”

Desert Autumn threw her arms around Nails. “I can’t wait! I’ll give it to Tep the day after tomorrow.”

“If you can’t wait, why turn it in later?”

“Because this is our time together now, silly. I won’t give that up for anything. Where do you want to go?”

“Something new seems fitting. Do you have one ready?”

Autumn nodded. “Ward!”

The diminutive hologram materialized between the two warriors. “You rang?”

“Start program Autumn Wind,” Autumn said.

In an instant Ward and the White Room were gone. Nails and Desert Autumn were now standing

ankle-deep in marshy ground, surrounded on all sides by skeletal trees draped in wispy moss. The sky was dim in twilight, the air alive with the buzzing of insects and the sounds of small creatures.

Desert Autumn indicated a low rise in the trees nearby. "Just beyond that ridge is a labor camp full of this region's indigenous people. In twenty minutes' time the camp guards are going to receive a radio message to start killing everyone. We have that long to save the camp."

"Long odds against a high-danger scenario," laughed Nails. "Is this your idea of a romantic engagement?"

"What's the matter? Think we can't do it?"

"Quite the opposite. With you, I think...I think we can do anything."

They pulled close, almost close enough for a kiss. Then Autumn teasingly put her finger against Nails's mouth, turned, and ran for the ridge. Smiling to himself, Nails cracked his knuckles--an impressive feat for one who did not actually have knuckles--and followed her.

## November

The day had finally arrived. Nails and Desert Autumn waited together in one of the rooms around the Pit arena while the current bout finished. Nails was dressed in his black field ops uniform while Autumn wore her best silks with strategic padding added. She carried her spear while several daggers and numerous throwing knives were concealed in her outfit. She was working through the same series of warm-up exercises over and over.

"Nervous?" Nails asked.

"What? No!...ok, a little. All right, a lot! Quit looking at me that way!"

"I'm just happy, is all." Nails stepped close to Autumn and put a hand on her cheek. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Desert Autumn said as she kissed her man. "Oh! I almost forgot."

She took a small wrapped package from the folds of silk at her hips and handed it to Nails. "A little something the seraglio girls put together for me. Kind of a going away present."

"Really?" Nails said. "They don't resent you getting free?"

"Probably some of them, yeah. Mostly, I think they're happy for me. A few of them are just glad to be rid of the competition."

"Oh. How touching and morose, all at once." Nails opened the present and found a dozen tiny teardrop-shaped amulets on leather straps. "Nice, what are these?"

"Talismans powered by the home version of the Pit's translation magic. They'll help us get through learning each other's languages."

"Right, right. I can't believe I never thought of that. This place spoils you." Nails held up one of the amulets, then put it back in the box and stuffed it in a pocket. "I look forward to hearing what you really sound like."

"Oh, Hadallai is a beautiful language! I can't wait to sing for you! What about your tongue, what's it like?"

"My what? Oh, language. Um, Nifh is, well...it's been compared to a whale choking on a huge bag of compost and glass."

"What? It can't be *that* bad."

"No, really. Part of it's adapted from the Yd, which is a pretty harsh tribal language, and the rest is just bits and pieces from the myriad languages of the old Attenz Empire--"

Desert Autumn laid a finger on her beloved's lips. "I'm sure it will be fine."

The sound of the gong echoed down the hall from the pit.

"We're on," Nails said. "Are you ready?"

"With you? Always."

"Stop distracting me with innuendo! I need to focus."

"Focus is good."

“I said stop it!”

The gate at the end of the hall opened for the two warriors and they strode out onto the pit floor. Many thousands of fans roared their excitement from the stands.

“And now, Pit fans, the special event you’ve been waiting for!” the Arbiter’s voice resounded through the arena. “A battle for freedom, with death on the line!”

The crowd went wild.

“Two champions, fight fans!” raved the Arbiter. “Two fan favorites willing to face impossible odds for the ultimate prize! The good Bey Voshomin has agreed to allow his odalisque one desperate chance to win her emancipation. If she survives, she wins her freedom. The only alternative is death!

“At Autumn’s side, the heroic Nails stands, dedicated to rise or fall with his companion. Shall we give them their chance for glory, fight fans?”

The crowd roared its approval. The Arbiter hit the bell and the arena vanished.

Open sky now stretched overhead, cloudy and dark. High cavern walls loomed around the two warriors while the dirt beneath them, bizarrely, was criss-crossed by a perfect grid of intersecting lines.

“Oh, I know this setup!” Autumn said. “Careful, the terrain is--”

Four of the square patches directly beneath her erupted upward, carrying her atop a pillar seventy feet into the sky.

“Oooooook,” Nails said to himself, then called up to Autumn, “Stay put! I’ll come and get you!”

“No, wait there!” she shouted back. The terrain was beginning to shift more and more rapidly, the square sections rising and falling in increasingly complex patterns to form hills, walls, ramparts and even whole buildings. Presently the pillar descended again to almost ground level, whereupon Desert Autumn hopped off.

“Keep on your toes. The arena won’t hurt us, but it will make life interesting,” she said.

Nails looked around at the shifting terrain. “Good.”

The premise was simple.

Nails’s message to the Bey had described a scenario that he and George were certain the sadistic voyeur could not refuse. It proposed that Desert Autumn join Nails in a Pit battle against numerous opponents of a higher league than Autumn normally qualified for. Convinced that she could not survive such an ordeal, the Bey would accept its terms: victory for their team would earn her freedom.

The hideous odds--twenty on two!--only sweetened the deal. The Arbiter had enlisted an array of truly vicious creatures to volunteer for the battle, knowing that such a setup would draw a record crowd.

It was all, of course, part of George’s plan. The contract stipulated terrain in the scenario that could even the odds. Anything that could provide hiding places or defensible locations could offset the advantage of numbers.

Even the choice of opponents played into the plan. Powerful, monstrous creatures would entice the Bey, excite the crowd--and be perfect targets for Nails. Whereas he would feel compelled to limit himself against mortal opponents, he had no qualms about unleashing on vampires, demons, the horrid things that preyed upon the innocent when they were not living vicariously through the violence of the Pit.

Nor was Nails who he had once been. He was no longer the displaced young soul that had battled the odd menace in a quiet mountain town out of boredom, or the enthusiastic but overconfident enigma that had joined the Lonely Winds. The last year of adventuring with the team and intense training in the White Room had done wonders for him. Gone were his tendencies toward showing off in a fight using inefficient techniques. His style was pure and refined, coached by Desert Autumn and Ward, honed into a razor edge designed to make the best use of his abilities.

The first demonstration of this was upon a creature of the same sort as the one that had once inadvertently led Will to the Pit. Its sickly-white skin stood out starkly against the earthen tones of the canyon, making it a perfect target for Nails. He might not have taken it by surprise had he not come from the one direction its wide-set eyes could not see: directly above.

With a fearsome cry Nails dove fists-first into the thing. Bones shattered and flesh tore as Nails’

momentum hammered the monster into the hard ground. Its vertical mouth opened in a shriek of agony and Nails put his fist through it and out the back of its head. Nails could not hear the roar of the crowd watching beyond the veil of illusion that was the sky, but he thought, with a smile to himself, it must definitely be there.

Something hit him from behind and he tumbled forward over the demon's mangled remains, coming up in a roll to turn and face his attacker, a four-armed, reptilian horror covered in quills. It snarled, its enormous fanged maw drooling caustic saliva that hissed when it touched the ground.

"Nice. You wanna take this one, honey?" Nails said.

"Sure."

The creature stopped growling, blinked, turned and was struck in the snout by the butt of Desert Autumn's spear. It snarled in rage and was jabbed in the eye; it yelped in pain and was impaled through the gut.

Enraged, the creature charged blindly and impaled itself on the weapon's massive spearhead. Autumn's spear withdrew in a flicker dripping blood of an oddly orange tint and began to harrow the beast, lashing back and forth faster than it could react, gouging wounds in flesh and muscle until the brute collapsed in a mangled heap.

Once more, Nails did not need to hear the crowd cheering to know it was there.

So the couple went, working their way through their opponents. Desert Autumn kept hidden as much as possible among the shifting landscape, springing from cover to strike with lethal precision while Nails walked in the open, drawing the enemy out. More than one abomination fixated on one of the two fighters only to be struck down by the other. Autumn and Nails' practiced teamwork and skill were the perfect equalizers against the odds they faced in the continually-reshaping landscape.

One by one the enemy fell, left in pools of blood, scattered upon the ground that continued to restyle itself, morbidly indifferent to the corpses littered about it.

Nails broke the jaw of a multi-horned ape-thing and tossed it into a low hut-like structure that quickly receded into the ground. "I think that's twenty," he said.

"Really? I gave that one nineteen," Desert Autumn said as she hopped down from a low pillar to stand next to her beloved.

"No, I really think it's twenty," Nails said and began to count on his fingers. "The vampire with the flail was fifteen, the demon-bunny thing was sixteen, the skeleton wrapped in blue gelatin was seventeen..."

"No, the vampire was fourteen," Desert Autumn said. "I know there's another one here somewhere."

"Are you sure? I thought I had kept track all right. Maybe he saw the ass-kicking we've been handing out and ran for cover."

Silence reigned in the canyon but for the periodic rumble of sections shifting.

"What do you think? Should we hunt it down, or--"

Nails turned and froze, still as death.

The missing twentieth opponent was standing directly behind Desert Autumn with one black-gloved hand clamped over her mouth. The long blade of a dagger jutted from a wound just over her heart.

It was not in Nails' nature to be cruel. For all the power he had been given he was still a gentle person at heart, slow to anger, loathe to hold a grudge. With all the training he had undertaken in the past year there had always been an emphasis on control: to check rather than harm, to harm rather than maim.

Perhaps it was a mercy that Nails did not realize what he did to Desert Autumn's killer. There was the first frozen split-second when he saw the life fading from Autumn's pleading eyes; the next instant he was kneeling, cradling her body, his arms covered in dark blood and bits of bone. He did not notice the dusty canyon floor becoming gray stone or hear the gong ringing and the Arbiter's voice declaring the winners. He wanted to cry, to release his grief, but he had no tears to shed.

A hand touched Nails's shoulder. In a flicker he was on his feet, clasping the offending hand in

one of his own with the other locked on its owner's throat.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" said the Arbiter. He was standing a few feet away from Nails, along with ten guardsmen, including the one Nails was now throttling.

"How about you let the nice guardsman go, so I don't have to declare an incident?" said the Arbiter dryly.

Nails shoved the gasping man away and glared at the Arbiter. "What the hell is going on here?" he demanded.

"What's going on? The fight ended five minutes ago and you've been down here canoodling your girlfriend," said the Arbiter. "I had to put a cover over the arena to shut the crowd up."

"Shut the cr--Autumn is *dead!*" Nails cried. The guardsmen aimed their weapons at him.

"Yeah, she's dead, but she put on a hell of a show, so good for her," grumbled the Arbiter. "Clear the pit floor already."

Several of the portcullises around the arena opened and teams of guardsmen and attendants emerged, carrying stretchers. They jogged across the floor and began to collect the remains strewn about the arena. When one of the teams approached Desert Autumn's body, Nails stood between them and her.

"Look, do you want us to help her, or not?" asked the Arbiter.

Nails suddenly looked hopeful. "You're going to help her?"

"That remains to be seen, but we can't do much with her lying there in her own blood, can we?"

"You are the most tactless person I have ever known," Nails grated. He was fighting the urge to beat the little man senseless.

"It's too bad I can't make money off that sentiment," the Arbiter said. "Now get out of the way and let my men clean this place up."

Staring daggers at the small man, Nails turned and stormed out of the pit.

Desert Autumn was taken and lain in state on a stone altar in a cool room deep within the labyrinthine side passages of the Pit. Had Nails not been on the verge of despair he might have surmised that the room was a parlor designed to accommodate not only the newly dead, but to neutrally accept the rites and customs of their native culture. As it was he could only stand by and watch helplessly as two of the Bey's seraglio girls anointed her with oil, covered her with a satin sheet and lit dozens of candles, singing a mournful dirge as they worked.

"Are you going to help her?" Nails finally asked the Arbiter, who was standing nearby leaning on his staff looking bored.

"That depends," he replied.

"Why? You told me once that you have magic that can bring back the dead."

"Yes, but it's very expensive." The Arbiter glanced at Nails and actually flinched at the look he was given. "Well, it is. And before you ask, no, you don't have nearly enough credit. Those marathon training sessions have bled you dry."

"Fine. Put me in as many fights as it takes to earn the difference."

"I could, but there's a complication."

"Oh, for the love of--what the hell is it?!"

"Calm yourself." The Arbiter shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "The problem is that the call isn't yours to make."

"*What?! Then whose?*"

"It's mine," said the Bey Voshomin, striding into the room as though he owned it, followed by a sizable entourage.

"You!" Nails snarled and moved toward the Bey. Two of Voshomin's guards crossed spears in the angel's path.

"The girl you are mourning is my property," said the Bey loftily. "Whether or not she is to be raised is my decision."

"She won her freedom from you!" Nails shouted so loudly that the singing mourners jumped.

"She died winning that freedom, before I could present it to her. If you want to dispute this, we

can ask the Arbiter to make a ruling.”

Nails looked at the Arbiter, who shrugged as if he'd been asked the time.

“Fine,” said Nails. “What do you want?”

“What makes you think you have anything to offer that I would want?” Voshomin asked.

Nails hurled aside the two guards between himself and the Bey, moving to loom over the nobleman. Spears and firearms were immediately pointed at his face.

“Don't play games with me right now,” he warned.

“I want servitude,” the Bey said, quite calm. “Yes, three years of devoted, uninterrupted service in exchange for the girl's life.”

It only took Nails an instant to decide. “Done.”

“Arbiter, my accountants will answer any bills you send,” said the Bey.

“Call Stillwater,” the Arbiter said to a guardsman, who hurried out, leaving behind the mournful singing in the chamber.

In an hour's time the Arbiter's major domo, Mathias Stillwater, was set up in the parlor with seven of his hooded priests and three crystal orbs that glowed with brilliant white light. The eight of them formed a circle around Autumn with the priest on Stillwater's right holding one of the glowing orbs, with the other two stashed in a corner. Nails, Bey Voshomin, his entourage and the seraglio mourners all crowded the chamber, watching. The Arbiter had departed.

“Quiet please, everyone,” said Stillwater. “There's no guarantee that this will work and we don't get many tries.”

If Nails had any breath to hold, he would have done so.

The priests began to chant, a low hum that resonated against the stone walls. Stillwater was speaking under his breath, reciting the incantation through total focus as his acolytes droned their ancient litanies. Several moments of chanting passed this way. Then, all at once, the light in the orb flared, bathing the room and everything in it with blinding illumination. Everyone but Stillwater turned away: Mathias was unwavering in his resolve. The immense power stored in the globe was bent to his will, molded by the mental exercise of the spell into revitalizing energy and forced into the still form lying before him.

Light flared from within Desert Autumn's body, pouring from her eyes, nose, mouth, and the open wound that had killed her. Those assembled looked on in amazement at the diminishing light from that wound as the flesh mended before their eyes. In mere moments the injury was gone and Autumn was whole again. A few moments more and the light withdrew into her and she awoke with a gasp.

“Autumn!” Nails said as he ran to and embraced her.

“Beloved?” she whispered. “It was so cold. I tried to call for you, but everything grew so dark, and then there was light all around me...”

“It's all right. We brought you back,” said Nails softly.

“Don't anybody worry about me,” Stillwater grumbled as he leaned against a wall, trying to catch his breath. “I'm just the guy who pulled off a miracle. No one offer to get me some coffee or anything, it's fine. I should just plot take over this place...”

“Bring her,” the Bey ordered two of his guards.

The two burly men moved forward, shoved Nails aside and seized Desert Autumn by her wrists. For just a moment Nails stared at them before grabbing them by their necks and smacking their foreheads together.

“What the hell is this?” Nails demanded as he hurled the two men against the wall on either side of the Bey. “What are you playing at?”

Spears and swords were again aimed at Nails, but the Bey waved them off. “I am reclaiming my possession,” he said.

“Your *possession*? We've already agreed that I would serve you if you raised her!” Nails blurted.

“Now *there's* a statement that sounds dirty taken out of context,” Stillwater said to himself.

“We agreed to no such thing,” said the Bey. “My offer was for the girl to accept. Three years of

servitude in exchange for being returned to life.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Nails asked. Desert Autumn was sitting up on the altar, listening and unconsciously rubbing the skin over her heart.

The Bey shrugged. “Then we kill her again.”

“You’ll all be dead before you hit the floor!” Nails raged. Every weapon in the room filled the narrow space between him and the Bey.

“You don’t want to do that, Nails,” said Stillwater.

“Stay out of this, Mathias!”

“I can’t do that, my friend. I may not say the words you want to hear, but I have to be the voice of reason. The law is on Voshomin’s side, here.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s the truth. Voshomin played it underhanded, but he did have ownership of Desert Autumn before and he did pay for this resurrection. By Pit law, this dispute is theirs to settle.”

“But this is wrong!” Nails moved back to Autumn’s side and took her hands in his. “We went through all of this so she would be free!”

“It doesn’t matter!” Mathias said. “By Pit accords and their own native law Desert Autumn is indebted to Bey Voshomin. She makes the choice of if she complies with his demands and he *can* have her executed if she does not. If you or anyone else tries to interfere, as security chief here I will have to take a hand in stopping it. But worse...even worse, is that I could be ordered to carry out the execution. Please, *please* don’t put any of us in that position.”

For a long moment Nails looked at Stillwater quietly. Finally Desert Autumn put a hand on her beloved’s cheek and turned his face toward hers. They rested their foreheads together for one solemn moment. Then Autumn pulled away, stood, and walked over to stand before the Bey.

“Three years?” she asked.

“Three years,” the Bey affirmed with a leer up and down Autumn, lingering on her bloody top. It took every bit of Nails’s willpower not to beat the man to death where he stood.

“I will return to the seraglio and await your commands, my lord,” Autumn said, barely above a whisper.

“Oh, I think not,” Bey Voshomin chuckled and waved two more of his people forward. “Cuff her.”

“What?!” Nails growled.

“One of my advisors told me that you were a bad influence. I have seen the wisdom of that,” the Bey said, turned and walked out of the chamber and down the hall. His entourage minus the two battered guards followed him, with the two leading Desert Autumn in chains bringing up the rear. Nails walked with her, Mathias and his priests behind them and all listening to the Bey:

“We are returning to my palace. As luxurious as the Pit is, I think my girl needs a lesson in fundamentals. Some time spent fighting for her life without the safety of leagues and healing arts should be a good lesson in humility.”

Nails and Desert Autumn looked desperately at each other, then back at Stillwater, who shook his head helplessly.

Before long the group had come to the outer hall of the Pit where the transport chambers were located. Bey Voshomin’s people moved dutifully into one of the cubes with the Bey at the front. Autumn’s captors made a point of taking her to the cube’s back wall, as far from Nails as possible.

“Perhaps, *if* she survives the next three years, I’ll bring her back and leave her here,” the Bey said. “Perhaps I won’t.”

Nails looked past him to Desert Autumn. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. The wet skin glistened like molten gold.

“I’ll wait for you!” he called to her as the Bey signaled the chamber manager. “To make sure you get here safely.”

She smiled at him through her tears and reached out to him with one shackled hand: he reached back to her, and then the chamber filled with light and was empty.

For a long time Stillwater watched Nails look at the empty room. Then the big man turned and walked slowly away. Mathias watched him go, silently cursing his place in what had happened.

“Ward!” Nails bellowed as he stormed into his White Room. The hologram appeared in front of him, hands clasped together.

“Mathias told me what happened. I’m sorry for your loss,” he said. “He also wants to look into--”

“Give me targets. Lots of them. Right now,” said Nails.

“Are you sure? I’m no therapist, but shouldn’t you take some time to grieve?”

“I will be grieving for the next three years,” Nails said. “Right now I just need to hit something. And, Ward?”

“Yes?”

“Feel free to make some of them look like the Bey.”

The briefest of smiles played across Ward’s simulated features. “Done.”

Nails stormed into his White Room, which immediately shook with the sounds of combat mixed now and then with an agonized wail.