

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



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THE SUPREME MIGHT OF LOVE

Christa Tomlinson

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE SUPREME MIGHT OF LOVE

By Christa Tomlinson

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Three men are dressed in the garb of ancient Rome. The man in the centre sits on a chair that is draped in rich red cloth. His face is soft, yet patrician. His slender body is adorned in the briefest of gold armour. The men on either side of him are dressed as warriors, their powerful chests and thighs bare. One warrior gazes at the man in the centre, while the other stares at you.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am Mars, Guardian of soldiers and farmers—God of War, Destruction, and Masculinity. People mostly know about my female lovers, but now and then I crave the strong form of my followers and come to male mortals. This time, this soldier and this gladiator have caught my fancy because violent desire—powerful and manly—is growing between them, and I want to be part of it. I have a feeling I will get so richly tangled in the battle of their love that I might consider staying with them until the end of their lives.

It may seem to you that I look soft in this image, but it is because I want them to think they can guard me, and not the other way around. I want them to fall in love with this idea of me, not with their fierce protector, even if their lives have been in my hands more than once.

Make us an epic love story (keeping the angst levels low, for these are dynamic men, and I am ferocious predator—even in this soft form), and I will inscribe your name in the stars forever as reward.

Hello! Say good-bye to Mars, Gabbo here. I'm not a history buff, but I need to feel the story accurately ingrained in its time period, and it must be a three-way through and through. If all three hunks could be sexually versatile it'll be even better. Thanks!

Sincerely,

Gabbo

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: Ancient Rome, enemies to lovers, gods, soldier, gladiator, poly mmm, mythology, switch/versatile, 2 alpha males, storytelling

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 20,843

From the Author

First, I would like to thank the M/M Romance Group for all the amazing work they do putting on this event. It's a lot of fun and I know there are countless readers and writers who appreciate it. Also, thank you to Gabbo for this prompt! I thought it was wonderful and I chose it for the chance to indulge in something I've gotten away from, my love of ancient history. I hope you enjoy this story! A very special thank you to Crystal, Holly, and Linzey for beta reading for me. Your pairs of eyes were very helpful!

THE SUPREME MIGHT OF LOVE

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Chapter 1

Andronicus approached the villa. The light of dozens of candles lit the path, guiding his way. Music and laughter poured out into the night, telling him that the celebration was well underway. The fragrant smell of roasting meat teased his nose as he grew closer. When he reached the door, he gave his name to the house servant standing there and was immediately granted entry. Andronicus stepped into the home, which was glowing with the light of even more candles. They illuminated a scene that was expectedly decadent. Musicians played in one corner. Everything about them was golden; their instruments, their robes, even their skin was gilded. Acrobats stood upon daises, twisting and contorting their bodies into the most inexplicable of shapes. Andronicus spied two jugglers strolling around the rooms, tossing what looked suspiciously like phallic-shaped objects into the air. A dozen mostly nude young men and women representing bacchi slipped through the crowd. Flowered wreaths were upon the women's heads, their breasts bare with red painted nipples, while the sheerest of veils covered them from the waist down. The male bacchi had silver horns fixed to their heads. Their cocks and balls were wrapped with silver ribbon, the rest of them left bare. The hands of the richly dressed guests roamed freely over all of the exposed skin. Andronicus had barely taken everything in when Barrius, the patron of this feast, saw him and came forward with outstretched arms.

“Andronicus! The great bard, here to entertain us all with his tales.” He kissed Andronicus on both cheeks then turned back to face the crowd of revellers. “You’ll entertain us with your tales while our lovely bacchi entertain us with their tails.” Boisterous laughter followed Barrius’s play on words, accompanied by squeals as the tails of the bacchi were caressed and squeezed by the guest nearest to them. Barrius smiled indulgently and threw an arm over Andronicus’s shoulder. “Come. Drink some of my finest wine so that your throat will be wet and ready to speak for hours on end.” He laughed again as he guided Andronicus to a chair in the centre of the room.

A goblet of wine was offered, which Andronicus accepted. Barrius reclined on a couch, pulling the handsome young man at his side down to sit in front of him. Others took their cue from their host and gathered around, sitting on padded stools or lounging on pillows tossed on the floor. Andronicus took a sip of the wine. It was sweet. He raised the goblet to Barrius. “Dionysus himself could not prepare finer.”

Barrius acknowledged the praise with a nod. “My ears are anxious to hear your tale, bard. Begin.”

Andronicus took another sip of the sweet wine before he began. “I sing to you a tale of a passion so strong it caught the attention of a god. Atrius Kasen Sertorius Germanicus and Titus Vitruvius were two men who lived a hundred years ago. They were both strong, powerful men skilled in combat. Sertorius as a legate in the Roman army. Vitruvius as a gladiator. And in the beginning they hated each other. Or so they thought...”

Atrius Kasen Sertorius Germanicus listened to the roar of the crowd. Its ferocity rivalled that of a lion on the hunt and was just as blood-thirsty. They hungered to see blood in the arena. The more spilled, the more they lusted for it. Kasen did not approve of such blood lust. He understood it was a way of Roman life, but to him, deaths in the arena were not honourable. Gladiators fought for the cheap thrills of the crowd which clamoured to see brutal maimings and death. Deaths that did nothing to advance or protect the realm. He had fought across the empire, winning battles for Rome. *That* was honourable. If his legionaries were not assigned to keep the peace, he would not be here to witness such low entertainment.

Horns blared, signalling the start of another contest. This time the fanfare was prolonged, building to a crescendo that brought the crowd to their feet. Kasen knew what that meant. The champion of this arena would be fighting next. The master of ceremonies stood, flourishing the extravagant length of his toga. The crowd quieted just enough for his voice to be heard across the sands where Kasen stood.

“Citizens of Aquileia! It is your honour to witness what may very well be the final battle of our heroic champion.” Boos echoed around the arena while the master of ceremonies waited, a patient smile on his face. “He has entertained us in such a way that your reluctance to see him go is understood.” The boos quieted and he continued. “He has fought for five years, spilling blood in over fifty battles! But on this day, he hopes to fight with such valour, such strength, that he earns his freedom!” This time the crowd cheered. The master of ceremonies raised his hands to the sky, shouting so loud the veins in his neck stood out and his face turned red. “I give you the Champion of Aquileia, Titus Vitruvius!”

Another round of horns sounded with even more fanfare than before. Hinges creaked as the wooden gates to the bowels of the arena slowly opened.

Nothing happened at first. People in the audience chanted the gladiator's name, impatiently craning their necks to try and see down the tunnel. Finally, when the crowd was cheering and stomping their feet so hard that the benches of the arena shook, a figure emerged from the shadowy darkness. He was tall, his body hard with muscle. His hair was the colour of night, his skin oiled and hairless in the style of the gladiator. As he stepped into the sunlight, the scars marring his flesh stood out in stark relief. Leather armour covered his vulnerable belly, but his broad chest was left bare. Below the armour he wore a loin cloth, leaving his powerful thighs bare to the knee. Metal plates guarded his legs, and leather caligae were on his feet. The sun glinted off the metal plates that protected his sword arm.

Kasen watched the gladiator stride to the centre of the arena to face the city's dignitaries. The man was an impressive specimen standing there in the sun. But Kasen didn't share in the city's worship of him. He'd had several run-ins with the man, none of them positive. That, combined with Kasen's distaste for the games, ensured that they would never share talk over a cup of wine.

Titus pulled on his helmet for what he hoped was the last fucking time. He'd been fighting in the sand and the dirt for five years and managed to survive. If he fought well today and survived one more time, he'd be given his freedom. He stood there waiting for his opponent, fingers flexing on the grip of his gladius, thigh muscles clenching with the urge to spring forward and attack. He forced himself to stand still as the big Celt saluted the praetor and his guests and then the crowd. Once his salute had been acknowledged, he put on his helmet.

Titus sank into his fighting stance, legs spread wide for balance. His shield was raised for defence, his sword loose and ready for attack. He let his opponent come to him, taking the opportunity to observe. By the time the man swung his axe, Titus already had a feel for the rhythm of his movements. He jumped out of the way, immediately swinging back around to make an attack of his own.

As they fought, Titus blocked out the cheering crowd. He had one purpose, and that was to win this contest. His opponent stumbled, and Titus pressed his offence. He managed to get the Celt down to one knee. He raised his sword, prepared to give the strike that would hopefully see him to victory. But his opponent wasn't ready to be defeated. The Celt swung his shield, knocking Titus's sword back in a jarring blow. Before he could recover, the Celt jumped

to his feet, taking a wild swipe with his axe. Titus managed to avoid the worst of it, but the rough edge of the blade sliced open his chest, drawing the first blood he'd shed today. Quicker than he expected, his opponent charged at him. He rammed his shoulder into Titus's gut, knocking him to the ground. Sand flew up in his face as Titus landed awkwardly on his side, but he managed to roll quickly back to his feet.

The fight continued. The cut across his chest burned, and his shoulder ached from his fall. But he shook off the pain and ignored the sweat that was dripping into his eyes. No fight had ever been more important than this one. His freedom and an end to an endless stream of training and fights were at stake. He went on the attack in a vicious barrage of sword and shield. Eventually, Titus managed to get his opponent off balance. Titus jumped up and kicked out. His foot connected with the Celt's hand, knocking his weapon loose and to the ground. Titus landed in a crouch, spinning around to slice out with his sword. He connected with his opponent's leg, feeling the blade cleave skin and hit bone. The Celt bent to grasp his leg, bellowing in pain, but Titus gave no quarter. He rose and charged forward, jumping up again to catch his opponent in the soft tissue under his chin with the hard bone of his knee. Another bellow of pain came from the big man, accompanied by a tooth flying from his mouth. The next attack saw Titus hitting the man on the jaw with a hard blow from his elbow, followed immediately by a punch to the temple. Titus caught the glazed look in the Celt's eyes just before he keeled over and crashed to the ground.

Titus became aware of the crowd again. They'd whipped themselves into a screaming, stomping frenzy as they sensed an end to the contest. Titus slowly walked over to his downed opponent. He stood over the man, his foot on his chest, ready to deliver the death blow. Titus looked to the praetor first, waiting for the signal that would decide the man's fate. The dignitary stood slowly. He cast an eye about the crowd gauging their reaction, letting their shouts and cheers build to a fever pitch before he raised his hand to speak. It took several long moments before the audience quieted.

"Titus, you have fought well today. The gods have blessed you with victory!" He paused as the crowd cheered. "For your valour and strength that has rivalled that of Hercules, the city of Aquileia grants you your freedom." More cheers came, many of the spectators throwing flowers down onto the sand of the arena. The praetor spoke again. "We would not send you into your new life with the blood of your worthy opponent on your hands. Mercy to the Celt!"

Shouts of approval rang out, and Titus took a deep breath, lowering his sword. He'd done it. He'd earned his freedom, and he wouldn't have to take

another life before he left the arena. Stepping back, Titus removed his foot from his opponent's chest. He extended a hand to help the man to his feet. The Celt clasped his forearm, rising with some difficulty.

"The gods have blessed you with your freedom and me with my life. It is a good day."

"Let us pray that soon you are blessed with freedom as well."

Titus saluted the praetor one final time and began his walk from the arena. He took off his helmet and waved, giving the citizens one last look at their champion. They chanted his name, but Titus cared naught for the glory. Some men craved the adulation of the crowd. But he was not one of them. He was glad to be forever quit of the blood and sand of the arena.

Kasen rode behind his contingent of men that escorted the gladiators back to their ludus. He watched as the throngs lining the street fought to touch the dirty, bloody men. One man in particular was reached for time and time again. Titus Vitruvius. A woman swiped her scarf down the muscled arm of the gladiator. She brought the cloth to her nose, inhaling deeply before falling back in an apparent faint of ecstasy. Kasen shook his head at the display. What was it about this man that inspired such adoration? And why were his own eyes drawn to him so often? It brought him no peace of mind that the gladiator was so often in his thoughts. Kasen kneed his horse forward until he rode next to the gladiator. He wasn't acknowledged, but he spoke anyway. "I suppose that call for mercy mars your final victory."

"How so?" the gladiator asked without looking at him.

"You left the arena without one last chance to slake your blood lust." Now he had the man's attention. He looked at him with a hard expression.

"You know nothing of gladiators if you think I feel regret at sparing a man's life."

"You speak of gladiators as though you are something honourable, when all you are is beasts fighting in the dirt."

The gladiator laughed as he continued to walk. "You, with your armour so clean it gleams and cloak of finest cloth. You know nothing of what it is to fight for your life. You, who more than likely sat atop your steed, watching from the hillside as your men fought in the muck. I suppose that is honourable, for one such as you."

Kasen glared down at the man, longing to wipe the smug look off his face. “Watch it, slave. Your words and tone offend.”

“I am slave no longer,” he said as he proudly raised his chin.

“Then hold your tongue unless you wish to become so again. Free you may be, but you are still of no station to speak so to me.” Kasen kned his horse forward, putting an end to their conversation. They’d had many others like it on the occasions he’d escorted the gladiator through the streets. This one had come to an unsatisfactory conclusion for Kasen, just like all the others. As he rode away he felt the gladiator’s eyes on back. He ignored it, refusing to turn around. But he knew he would see that hard yet handsome face again, only it would be from behind closed lids in the dark of night.

Chapter 2

Titus wrapped the rough material of his cloak more securely about his shoulders as he walked the streets of Aquileia in the cold night. Two weeks had passed since he'd been given the rudis, a wooden sword to signify his freedom. He'd left the ludus where he'd lived and trained for five years with it, the clothes on his back, and a small pouch of coins. The rest that he'd earned in his five years had all gone towards other obligations. He needed to find work so that he could save his earnings for travel south to begin his new life. But for right now, he needed a hot meal. The tavern just ahead beckoned him with the warm light of candles shining through the sheepskin covered windows.

Pushing open the swinging doors, Titus walked into the tavern. He wasn't sure of the greeting he would receive. Sometimes he was honoured and treated to wine. Others he was ignored as a former slave. And sometimes he was accosted by men who wanted to prove that their cocks were bigger than his. Those were the nights he hated the most. Titus realised immediately that tonight would be his least favoured of all the options. Four legionaries sat at a far table. They were well into their drink and eyed him with clear disdain as he entered. Titus ignored them and went to the bar.

"Wine and a meal please." He dropped two coins, coins that he hated to part with, on the bar top. A cup and small flagon of wine were presently set before him with the assurance that food would be quick to follow. He'd finished his second cup and had just picked up the bottle to pour a third when the scrape of chairs on the wood floor preceded the sound of four pairs of boots crossing the room. Titus hoped they would leave without addressing him. The gods didn't see fit to honour his request.

"By the balls of Jupiter, it's the Champion of Aquileia."

The words were slurred. The tone derogatory. They were clearly meant not to give praise, but to offend. Titus stood and turned, so as not to have the men at his back. "I am champion no longer. Now I am just like any other man, here only for food and drink."

One of the soldiers, the biggest in the group, laughed. "Just like any other man, eh? No other man here rolled in the dirt with criminals, playing at being a great warrior." He drew his sword, casually eyeing the blade.

Titus wasn't fooled. No man drew his sword unless he planned to use it. With a casualness that was just as fake as the soldier's, Titus moved his cloak behind his shoulder so he could easily get to the handle of his own blade.

“While you re-enacted the true battles of great men for sport, *I* was defending the realm on the battlefield. I’ve slayed so many barbarians I’ve lost count.” The soldier looked from his blade to Titus. “But I’ve never killed a gladiator. Maybe the women of the city will want vials of my sweat to perfume themselves once I do.”

“I doubt it,” Titus said with a shrug. “No woman would want to smell like a rotting boar.”

The man stood there for a moment before he realised he’d been insulted. He laughed again, though the sound was cold and full of malicious intent. “The only thing that will smell of rotting boar will be your corpse after I run you through and leave you bleeding in the street, gladiator.”

The soldier swung, but Titus was ready for him. He blocked the blow with his own sword, following through with a punch to the jaw. The fight was on, which thankfully the other three men stayed out of. Titus and the soldier battled across the tavern, patrons scurrying out of the way. A few left in a rush, but most stayed to watch the fight. Titus managed to land a hard kick to the soldier’s midsection, sending him stumbling back to crash into a table. The man went down, taking the table and everything on it with him. He quickly regained his feet and picked up a chair to use to block Titus’s next attack. He thrust his sword from behind his makeshift shield, aiming for Titus’s belly. Titus jumped back. He was at a disadvantage because he wasn’t trying to kill this soldier. It was true that he was no longer a gladiator; he was free. But he wasn’t sure what the punishment would be if he were to kill a member of the Roman army. Provoked or not, he might have to face consequences for striking a fatal blow. That knowledge stayed his hand. He hadn’t survived the arena only to be sent to the salt mines for murder. The soldier, however, clearly felt no such restraint. He would have to end this quickly and in a way that did no lasting harm.

He took a blow to his sword arm with the chair in order to move in and grab the man’s sword hand. Once he had purchase on his wrist, Titus yanked him in close. Ramming his head forward, he slammed his forehead into the bridge of the man’s nose. He heard a crack and the soldier howled, spraying Titus’s face with blood. Titus pushed him back, hoping that would see an end to the fight. Unfortunately, the gods still weren’t inclined to grant him any requests. The soldier charged forward again. Titus braced himself, but before they clashed yet again, a commanding voice whipped through the room.

“Cease this now!”

The soldier froze so quickly that Titus knew someone of import had called for an end to their fight. He turned, and of course he saw Legate Atrius Kasen Sertorius Germanicus. He stood there flanked by a soldier on either side of him. All three men were dressed in armour, their red cloaks flowing behind them. Yet somehow, only Legate Sertorius managed to look majestic in the uniform. Titus had taunted that he sat atop his horse while his men did all the work. But in looking at his tall, well-formed figure, Titus knew that to be untrue. The strength displayed in the legate's body didn't come from watching. It came from hours of training for battle. His close cropped brown hair was slightly rustled from the wind, but that didn't take away any of the sternness from his hard yet handsome face. Sharp green eyes looked around the room. Full lips thinned with obvious displeasure when they saw the destruction the fight had caused.

They came further into the tavern. The soldier bowed and lowered his sword. Titus lowered his weapon as well, but he didn't bow. Sertorius held his hand up in a signal for the other two to hang back while he walked forward to stand in front of Titus.

“Having trouble adjusting to life as a free man, gladiator? How lucky for you I was here to give assistance.”

Titus narrowed his eyes in anger. “I did not want nor did I need your assistance.”

“It was not given for you, but to spare the barkeeper from having his establishment ruined further.” He raised his voice slightly so that the soldier would hear him too. “You both will pay for damages.”

Titus could tell the soldier didn't like that decree, but he went over and dropped a few coins on the bar top. Titus too was reluctant to part with any money, but he did so. They *had* caused damage and cost the man customers. “With apologies.” The tavern owner nodded and pushed a meat pie towards him. Titus accepted it gratefully. The man would have been within his rights to refuse to serve him after that fight. He was grateful that he didn't have to give up his coins without receiving the food he'd paid for. Thinking it best not to spend any more time there, he took the pie to leave and eat elsewhere. Before he crossed the threshold however, Sertorius called out to him.

“Gladiator.”

Titus tensed, turning around to face him. “I am gladiator no more.”

“Then it might be in your best interest to find worthy cause to occupy your time, rather than brawling in taverns. Either that or leave Aquileia. We would have peace here, and you seem to disrupt it.”

Titus had no reply to that. At least none that wouldn't start another brawl. Holding his tongue wasn't easy. But he managed to do so and left the tavern without further incident.

Three weeks later and Titus had neither left Aquileia nor found worthy cause to occupy his time. His time *was* occupied, but in no way would he describe it as worthily so. He was currently shovelling the muck out of stables. He wanted to leave Aquileia and head south. But current weather and lack of funds prevented that. If he were to be stuck in Aquileia for the winter, he couldn't afford to run through his meagre stash of coins. He needed work, but here people only wanted to hire him to train them in the gladiatorial arts or to put on displays. He had no desire to perform and was finished earning his way with a sword. That left him few options. At least here, he could bed down in an empty stall each night. And with the horses, he didn't have to deal with trying to prove who had the biggest cock. The horses were already the winner.

He patted the rump of the horse whose stall he'd just cleaned. He heard someone come into the stable, but didn't care to see who it was. Until he heard *that* voice.

“I see you took my advice to heart.”

He left the stall to see Sertorius standing there. “I have found cause to fill my time. Yet you refuse to take your own advice, choosing instead to follow me about the city.”

“You overestimate your worth, gladiator. I come here not for you, but to seek shelter for my horse from the storm.”

Titus tightened his fingers on the pitch fork he held. “I have told you that I am no longer gladiator. Cease addressing me by that title.”

“I would hardly call it a title. But as you have no other, it will have to do.”

“I would rather you direct your speech to me not at all. But if you feel you cannot resist, you can call me by my name, Titus Vitruvius.”

“I hardly deem such as you worthy of the honour.”

Titus's jaw hardened, his nostrils flaring with the beginning of rage. “I grow tired of your petty insults. Do you want to challenge me? Is that it?” He threw

the pitch fork aside. “I didn’t think you so small of cock to need to prove yourself thus. But if that’s what it takes to remove the thorn of Legate Sertorius from my ass, then I accept your challenge.”

Sertorius raised his chin, his green eyes bright with anger. “I have no wish to challenge you.”

Titus went over and stood directly in front of him. “Liar. You want to know if you are better, more skilled than the Champion of Aquileia. You are not, but I’ll give you the chance to try and prove otherwise.” He thumped the back of his fist on Sertorius’s breast plate. “You can even keep your armour on. You’ll need it.”

That final taunt was enough. Sertorius shoved Titus back and then swung a fist at his jaw. Titus wasn’t fast enough to get out of the way, and the punch landed on its target. He shook it off, refusing to show any pain. Titus threw a punch of his own, hitting the legate in the identical spot on his jaw. Sertorius took the hit with little reaction, just as Titus had. They stood there, glaring, blood pumping, chests pumping. As Titus watched, Sertorius began undoing the buckles that held his armour secure to his torso. Titus grinned in approval. It was foolish to give up that advantage, but it gave him hope that the legate would be a worthy opponent. The second the metal plates and cloak were tossed aside, Titus rid himself of his grin. They would battle, and he had no room in his mind to think any positive thoughts of the man he intended to best. He gestured mockingly for Sertorius to come at him. His lip curled in disdain, Sertorius came towards him. The fight was on, a vicious, sweaty brawl that was long overdue. They needed this release, and the fight wouldn’t stop until one of them lay on the ground in defeat.

Olympus

Mars sat watching the two mortals battling. Their rage was so strong, burning so hot that it drew his attention. The two men had a dislike for one another that was powerful enough to rival the hatred his mother Juno had for Hercules. But just beneath that was a simmering passion that was ready to explode, though neither man would admit it. As he watched, he couldn’t help but wonder if he should help expose the true reason for their explosive feelings towards one another.

“This again, brother?”

Mars turned to see his sister, Venus, approaching. Long reddish blonde hair fell to her waist in curls that never appeared mussed. Her gauzy blue gown with its trailing veils shifted and flowed as though a gentle wind stirred the fabric. But there was no wind on Olympus. She joined him on the couch where he sat, to look down on the mortal plane.

“Every time I take notice of your absence, I find you watching these two brutes. Why do they hold your attention so?”

“They intrigue me,” Mars replied with an answer that didn’t truly answer the question. And of course, Venus was not put off by his evasion.

“Cryptic, brother. You know I don’t have the patience for such games. Tell me true why you watch them. Do you seek to give them your favour on the battlefield?” She looked from the fight to him. “Or do you watch them with more sensual thoughts in mind?”

Mars studied his nails nonchalantly. “I have already given them my martial favour. And both have done well with it upon them.”

Venus’s eyes widened as she took his meaning. “Then it is sensual delights you seek. How wonderful! Shall I help you, brother? Pick one and I shall cast the glow of love upon them. When next they see your face they will long for you.”

“I have no need of your help,” he answered with all the arrogance of a god. “And I shall have them both. Together.”

A disbelieving burst of laughter came from his sister. “You will claim them without my assistance to aid you? Impossible, brother. You well know of Roman men and their preference for the softness of youth.” She ran her eyes over him.

Mars was well aware of what she saw, which was neither softness nor youth. In his normal appearance, he was big, tall and muscular. He dressed in rough leather and boots lined with the fur of his chosen animal, the ram. His eyes were black as night and his hair was a wild tumble of black curls. The dark shadow of a beard roughened the hard line of his jaw. Callouses hardened hands that wielded a sword when he deigned to fight with his chosen mortals. As a god, he didn’t have to let the callouses stay on his hands. He chose to do so. And as a god, he could take on whatever guise he wanted.

“I am well aware of what is preferred, sister.” He stood, inhaling on a long, deep breath. A rush of power went through him. Unlike his normal bursts of

power that roared with flames of strength and cunning, this power was a warm, gentle breeze. Mars opened his eyes. Venus sat on the couch, comical surprise upon her face.

“You jest.”

Mars smiled. “Not at all.”

“Well, you might grab their attention looking like that, but you’ll never convince them to be together. They are enemies with every bit of their mortal souls.”

Mars ran a callous-free hand over his shorter, softer hair. “Watch me.”

Venus abruptly straightened, her attention back upon the mortal plane. “*You* watch. One is about to kill the other.”

Mars swung around. The brawl had escalated. Both men were bloody. Titus’s tunic was ripped, Kasen’s cloak torn from his body. And from their current positions, it did look as though one was about to kill the other.

“What are you going to do?” Venus asked.

“Stop the fight. Keeping them from reaching their climax will further my cause.” He grinned and snapped his fingers, disappearing from sight.

The barn door opened. Neither of the combatants paid the creaking of the door any mind until a shout blasted their ears.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Titus heard the bellow and looked to his right. The stable owner had come in, discovering their fight.

“Something told me to come out and check on the horses to make sure the storm hadn’t spooked them. Instead I find I am witness to attempted murder!”

Titus lowered the pitchfork. “No. We fought, but it would not have gone that far.” The stable owner eyed him with doubt. Titus wasn’t surprised. He’d been found standing over a man, holding a pitchfork aimed at his throat. Murder was a logical conclusion.

Sertorius go to his feet. “It would not have been murder because he would not have gotten the best of me.”

Titus swung to face him. “You were in the dirt at my feet,” he snarled. “Defeat was fast upon you.”

The stable keeper came forward, stepping between them. “My apologies, Legate Sertorius. I would not have a man of your honour disrespected so.”

Titus closed his eyes for a moment. He knew what was coming. When he opened them, the stable owner was frowning at him.

“Titus Vitruvius, you are dismissed.”

“At least you showed me the respect of speaking my name.” He bowed slightly. “Apologies for bringing dishonour to your establishment.” He turned to Sertorius, but him he did not offer an apology. Instead, he threw the pitchfork at the legate’s feet. Titus gave him his back and left to collect his belongings.

Chapter 3

Titus sat in a tavern, a different one than before. It was seedy, with patrons who were more inclined to misdeeds than not. But he wasn't too worried he would be bothered here. Soldiers didn't frequent this establishment. The men who did were cowards and lowlives, easily put off by his size and reputation. Unfortunately, the wine he drank was foul and sour and the roasted pork in front of him smelled rotten, but he was willing to accept it in exchange for peace.

"I seek aid for my master."

Titus turned at the soft voice that just barely broke over the raucous noise in the small room. A young man stood in the doorway of the rough establishment. His features were fine, with gently rounded cheeks still absent the bristly hair of full manhood. A slave's collar circled his throat, but his dress was quality. A treasured slave then, more than likely a personal body servant to his mentioned master. The boy looked nervous to be in such an environment, his sandalled feet crossing the threshold the barest inch. But he repeated his request, this time in a louder voice.

"I seek aid for my master."

A patron stood. His pale blonde hair marked him as one from the Rhineland. As did the rough cadence to his speech. "I can aid your master boy. And then maybe after, you aid me, eh?" He laughed, taking a sloppy drink from the wooden cup in his hand. Liquid spilled down his face, wetting his beard and the already stained material of his tunic.

The slave shrank back in disgust, his voice growing tremulous. "My master is in need of a bodyguard. Are you practiced with the sword?"

"Well, I'm certainly good at thrusting."

Roaring laughter followed the coarse joke, and the boy's cheeks turned red with embarrassment. Titus stood, determined to put an end to the boy's suffering and make sure that he didn't come to any harm. And if by doing so he was able to solve the slave's problem as well as his own, all the better. He didn't want to earn his way by using a sword any longer. But he was growing desperate to find work. And as a guard, he hopefully wouldn't be expected to perform for an audience.

“I am practiced with the sword. I can serve your master as bodyguard, as long as the pay is good.”

The boy looked to him. He appeared to melt with relief. Titus knew that though rough, his appearance was much more respectable than the slovenly beast who’d first spoken.

“Yes, the pay is good. You will also be given food and shelter.”

Titus grabbed his small sack of belongings. His food and drink he abandoned without regret. He didn’t doubt he would find more appetising fare than that slop in the service of one who dressed his slaves so fine. “Let us quit this place.” He put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, unconsciously shielding the slender body with his own as they left. The German grunted once at having been passed over. But one hard glare from Titus and the man backed down.

“Where are we going?”

“To the villa of Lucien Marius Petronius. He will be most pleased to have gained the service of one such as you.” The young man looked at him with interest.

Titus noticed, but didn’t address it. If the boy was personal slave of this Lucien Marius Petronius, it would be unwise to seek pleasure with him.

“Then lead on so I can make his acquaintance.”

After a short trip outside the city, Titus entered the villa behind the young man. It was the most beautiful home he’d ever seen, surpassing by far the ludus he’d lived in for five years. He’d spent most of his time there in the gladiators’ barracks. But he’d caught glimpses of the personal quarters on many occasions. Those glimpses didn’t compare to this. The floors were marble and polished to a high shine. Colourful frescoes graced the walls and fountains sent gentle streams of water to pools swimming with brightly coloured fish. Thickly cushioned couches were covered in what looked like the finest of materials. They entered a room dominated by a large desk, with busts of heroes and gods lining the wall behind it. A golden statue of a thickly horned ram stood in the corner. A man dressed in a black and gold toga waited in front of the desk.

Titus knew immediately this was the master of this villa. The man was tall and slender of frame. Hair that was golden as a lion’s but looked soft as lamb’s wool graced his head. His eyes were black as night, but shone with energy and intelligence. His features were fine and his body slight compared to the bulk of

Titus's own, but the man had an air of strength and confidence about him. It didn't come from a place of cruel superiority as Titus had seen with far too many nobles. This one had inner power, and it radiated from him in a way that stirred Titus's blood. What would it feel like to take such a man beneath him? To touch that fine skin with his rough hands and channel that power into passion? The fantasy was arousing, but Titus knew such would never come to pass. To let such lusty thoughts show for a man of his class could mean loss of this post. Or worse. So he kept them from both tone and expression as he bowed slightly.

"Petronius. It is an honour to stand before you."

"Crispin has told you of my need?"

"Yes. You are desirous of someone to serve as protector."

"Indeed. I am newly arrived as the quaestor for Aquileia. As treasurer, I'll need someone to guard both my person and the coins I carry. Is this is a position that interests you? That you are capable of?"

Titus stood up straight, pushing his shoulders back. "I am a trained fighter, skilled with many weapons. And I'm intelligent. I don't fall for any tricks. None could protect you better."

A slight smile curved the sensuous mouth of Marius Petronius. "Of this I already have little doubt."

He named an amount that was so generous Titus had to fight to keep from showing his joy. With that much coin, he would be able to travel south and start his plans with money left over after a few months of service.

"If terms are agreeable, Crispin will see you to a bath and meal. I can give you more details on the morrow."

Titus nodded. "The terms are agreeable. And it is with deepest gratitude that I accept your offer."

"Excellent." Petronius nodded, and Crispin stepped forward.

"This way," he said with a bow towards the doorway.

Titus gave his new patron one more round of thanks before he followed the young man from the room.

Titus was lead towards the back of the villa. A bathing pool was there. It wasn't as fancy as the rest of the home, so he assumed it wasn't where

Petronius bathed. Still he was surprised that he wasn't shown to a wooden trough outside. The slave, Crispin, gave him a smile. He gestured at the dark skinned boy who was waiting next to the water.

“Renato will see to your cleansing. I will return with food. When you have finished bath and meal, Renato will show you where to rest.”

Titus nodded his thanks. Crispin left, and Titus began to disrobe. Renato stepped forward to help him. He was surprised that he wasn't sent a female servant to assist with his bath. But as he preferred the company of men, he was without complaint. Especially as appealing as this servant was. His skin was dark, his hair shaved. Surprising blue eyes stood out against the rich smoothness of his skin. He was small, but every muscle was hard and well defined. He wasn't surprised when his shaft begin to fill with this beautiful young man helping him to get naked.

Titus stepped into the bath; the young man quickly stripped and followed him. Once he was seated, Renato moved close to him. He dipped the cloth in his hand into the water then squeezed the warm liquid over Titus's chest and shoulders. Titus leaned back against the wall. It felt good to get clean, and the ministrations of Renato were gentle and soothing. He ignored his slight erection, relaxing to just enjoy the slide of warm cloth over his skin. But when the young man's hands moved between his legs, Titus moaned. The water rippled as Renato moved closer. His fingers wrapped around Titus's shaft, stroking the cloth along the length of it. Titus moaned again, his eyes falling shut.

“Is the bath to your liking?”

The voice, though calm, startled both Titus and Renato. Titus jerked upright, his eyes springing open to see Petronius standing there. He was smiling, so Titus assumed he wasn't angered. Still, he couldn't be too careful. His voice was respectful as he answered. “Yes, Petronius. I am grateful for the kindness.”

A slight wave went through the pool as Renato slid away from him and stepped out of the bath. The boy quickly dried and redressed himself. Titus stayed where he was. Silence fell between him and Petronius for a long moment. Titus was aware that he sat there naked, his erection visible through the warm, clear water. But Petronius didn't seem bothered by his body's response. Indeed, his dark eyes moved over him slowly, desire obvious in his expression. Titus sucked in a breath, mentally restraining himself from gripping

his cock and stroking it in the face of that look. If any other man were to look at him in that way, he wouldn't hesitate to do so. The silent moment was broken when Crispin walked back into the bathing room carrying a tray with a plate of food on one side and clothes on the other.

"Rise from your bath," Petronius ordered. "Renato shall dry you and Crispin has brought you new clothing."

Titus stepped out of the bath as directed. The servant approached with a large cloth and began to blot the water from his skin. His erection faded, but only by a little. Renato's fingers danced across his skin as he dried him, and the soft material of the bath sheet continually brushed against his shaft. He said nothing, however, as Petronius continued to address him.

"I must be at the forum early tomorrow. Crispin will be sent to wake you."

Titus started to answer, but just then Renato dropped to his knees in front of him. He moved the cloth up Titus's thighs, before lightly cupping his cock and balls to pat them dry. Titus clamped his mouth shut on a groan. He managed to give a nod in answer.

Petronius looked as though he were holding back a knowing grin. "I'll leave you to your meal and slumber then," he said as Renato stepped away.

Titus sat on a bench accepting the platter of meats, goat's cheese, and figs handed to him. Petronius and Crispin left, while Renato stayed to tidy the bathing room. Titus watched him move around, admiring his sleek body. Unlike Crispin who wore a tunic, Renato was dressed in the briefest of loin cloths that covered only the middle portion of his body. Titus admired his skin, hairless and gleaming in the candle light. The young man bent and Titus could see the shadowed valley of his ass. A soft groan escaped him, and the erection which had yet to truly fade came rushing back.

"If you are finished, I can show you to your bed."

Titus stood, nodding in agreement. He had hope that he'd be able to persuade this young man to share his bed and ride his cock. Titus grabbed his bag of belongings from where he'd placed it next to the bathing pool and followed Renato from the room further into the villa. They reached a short narrow hallway. On either side were small rooms, their entry ways covered by hanging cloths. Titus could just make out the outline of sleeping figures behind them. Renato stopped when they reached the last one on the right. He pulled the curtain back.

“Your quarters.”

Titus had to duck to pass through the opening, but once inside he could stand fully. There was a cot and a small table. Two shelves were cut into the walls for personal items. It was more than adequate for his current needs. Renato bid him good night and turned away. Titus lightly grasped his wrist, stopping him from leaving. “Are you for bed too, then?”

Renato nodded. “Yes.”

“Then perhaps I could persuade you to rest here.” He tugged slightly. “With me.”

The boy darted his tongue over his full bottom lip. “I would. But I cannot.”

“Are servants not allowed to see to their pleasure here?”

Renato shook his head, a slight smile appearing. “We are. But in this instance, I cannot. Forgive me.”

Titus let him go. He didn’t want to give offence. “There is nothing to forgive. Thank you for the bath and the meal.” Renato nodded in acknowledgment and left him alone. Titus stared at the swaying curtain for a moment after his departure. He’d been overly long without having his cock buried deep inside a tight, willing ass. He’d shied away from parting with his money to pay for company, and he doubted he’d be allowed back in the ludus to lay with the young man he’d taken as a casual lover. If Renato wouldn’t lay with him, he’d have to find someone who would. After blowing out the one oil lamp, Titus lay down on his new cot. It was soft and long enough to fit his frame. He would rest well this night, and he hoped for many more nights to come.

Chapter 4

Titus was frustrated. No, he was beyond frustrated. His cock was in a near constant state of arousal. In the three weeks he'd been in the service of Marius Petronius, he had yet to find a way to slake his lust. None of the boys in Petronius's villa would lie with him. And there were a lot of them there. Boys of every type of beauty imaginable. Boys with dark curls like his own. Boys with the golden locks of those east of the Rhineland. Richly dark-skinned Nubians and olive-skinned Greeks. Some of their bodies were deliciously hard. Others were pleasingly plump and soft. They were all beautiful and pleasant, serving him in every way he requested. Except the one he needed the most.

Baths had become a torture. He never bathed on his own. He was always attended by one of the servants. They cleansed him with gentle hands. They dried him with soft cloths. And during both cleansing and drying, they paid careful attention to his shaft. Just enough until he was filled to bursting, but not enough for him to gain relief. Every night he went to bed with his cock so hard it took him the barest number of strokes before he was bringing himself off. But that wasn't enough. Though they'd trained hard back at the ludus, they'd still had ample opportunity for carnal relations, whether it was with each other, or the women who paid to be pleased by gladiators. Titus had been without for weeks, and now he was desperate for touch. *To* touch. And the person he wanted to touch most was just before him. Lucien Marius Petronius.

He sat there dressed in a richly embroidered toga. A cloak lined with lamb's wool was tossed over his shoulders for warmth. A slight wind ruffled the curly brown fluff of his hair. The man was beautiful, his mannerisms gentle. There was something about him that made Titus want to protect him, regardless of his hired position.

But there was something else about him. Something earthy and sensuous. He'd caught Petronius looking at him several times with desire in his eyes, although it wasn't as if Petronius tried to hide. He never looked away when their eyes met, brazenly letting Titus see his desire. And that frustrated Titus all the more. He was not of the noble class. He was a servant to the House of Petronius. And as such, he had no right to initiate anything with his patron. So all he could do was fantasise. Fantasise about throwing Petronius down on the sumptuous bed he'd glimpsed in passing. Fantasise about covering his patron's slender body with his own muscular one. He wanted to grind his ever-hard shaft

against Petronius's sleek thighs until he came. Then, once he was ready again, he wanted to slide deep within him and make him howl with undignified pleasure. It was maddening how often those thoughts were in his head when he knew they were unlikely to become reality. Catching teasingly lusty looks from your patron was one thing. Fucking him like a common serving boy was another. So Titus continued to live on the edge of arousal. And there was no end in sight.

At least he was able to gain some moments of distraction during the daylight hours. He took his job as bodyguard seriously. Petronius was the newly arrived quaestor for Aquileia. In this position, he served as treasurer for the city. He was responsible for many financial matters and was often laden with coin. It was Titus's role to be sure that no one tried to coerce Petronius in his dealings. And of course, to protect him if he were to ever be accosted. So far he'd seen no physical threat. There had been a few men who'd tried to get out of terms they'd previously agreed to. A few steps forward and a cleared throat from Titus, and they were happy to continue with the original agreement. Petronius was pleased with his service. He'd already been rewarded with a few extra coins and extra clothing. The clothing he was happy to have. But the coins were precious. He'd yet to spend any, choosing rather to tuck them away for their future intended purpose of purchasing a home and farm in the south of the peninsula.

Titus looked at the sundial. The shadow indicated that the day's transactions would soon be concluding. The men and women who gathered in the forum each day to do business would soon return to their homes. Titus would escort Petronius safely back to his villa. But then he hoped to return to the city to take care of personal business of his own.

However, before Petronius rose from his seat, a sound that Titus recognised cut through the voices and baying of animals. The sound of feet marching in unison. He looked out over the group in front of Petronius and spied a formation of soldiers approaching. And of course behind them was Legate Sertorius. Titus held back an instinctive sneer when he saw the man. He was shiny as ever in his polished breastplate. A red plume across the top of his helmet waved with more ego than a peacock. He hoped the contingent would pass by without Sertorius noticing him. Jupiter's favour wasn't with him that day. The soldiers stopped and Sertorius came forward.

Marius was just finishing his business for the day. He was about to call for his covered coach when the man he'd been waiting to see finally approached him. Marius hid a smile. He'd thought he was going to have to seek the man out in order to put the rest of his plan in place, but here he was of his own volition. Marius stood to greet him.

"Legate Sertorius. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have heard much of your conquests in Germania, as well as the order you have brought to the city of Aquileia."

The soldier bowed respectfully, but Marius could see his eyes dart to the man behind him. "It is a pleasure to be in your presence as well, Petronius. I have heard that your dealings as quaestor have been fair and advantageous to the commerce of our city."

Marius accepted the accolade with a nod.

"I see you have hired one of our local heroes," Sertorius continued.

"Yes." He briefly looked over his shoulder at Titus, who stood there with the blackest of scowls on his face, and then back at Sertorius with a smile. "Titus has been most instrumental in maintaining my safety here in the city."

The legate straightened slightly. "I assure you that Aquileia is most safe, Quaestor. We would not allow harm to fall to our city's new treasurer."

"Of course not. But we can agree that there will always be men who try to take advantage of opportunity, yes? They might feel the risk is worth it if an opportunity to abscond with a cache of coin were to present itself. Titus is here to fill in the gaps where your honourable city guard cannot be at all times." Marius paused to smile. "I am a smart man, and as such, I see the need to take this precaution. Surely you understand."

"Of course Petronius. I meant no offence. I was simply concerned that there might be those in your employ who would be the ones to seek out that opportunity." His eyes moved to Titus, focusing on him. "Those who are new to your employment, for example."

Marius sensed Titus stiffen in anger behind him and was prepared for his bold reply.

"I am the only new man in Marius Petronius's household."

"Indeed you are," Sertorius replied coldly.

"Are you accusing me of plotting to bring harm to the house of Petronius?"

“I accuse you of nothing. I just don’t know your motives.”

“You have no need to know my motives. Nothing I do concerns you.”

“You are wrong, gladiator. Every man, woman, and child in this city is my concern. I seek to maintain order at all times.”

Marius felt Titus’s arm go around his waist, gently pushing him behind the big man and presumably out of harm’s way. Titus moved forward to stand toe to toe with the soldier. The two men were of equal height. Their builds were similar, though Titus was slightly heavier with muscle. Marius was entranced. Watching from above had been interesting. Being in the thick of such passionate fury was intoxicating. It had him rearranging his cloak to be sure his growing erection was concealed as Titus bit out his response.

“I have done nothing to disrupt the city unless your men or you instigate things first. Perhaps there is where you should begin your accusations: with them or yourself!”

The legate’s eyes narrowed, his lips thinning in anger. “The soldier in the tavern was wrong to accost you, and he has been punished for it. But I still believe your presence is disruptive.”

“Then perhaps the city’s guard is in need of better leadership if it cannot handle the disruptions of *one* man.”

A growl of anger came from Sertorius at that, his hand moving to grip the handle of his sword.

Marius hated to break up the delicious display before him. But he couldn’t allow Titus to be detained by the guard. Besides, he didn’t want the two men to have any climax to their feud. Not yet. He stepped from behind Titus.

“There is no cause for such animosity. Legate Sertorius, I appreciate your worthy concern, but I trust Titus with both my person and my coin. He does well as my personal guard.” Sertorius started to say something, but Marius cut him off. “If I ever detect any subterfuge, I swear upon my father’s name I will have him cast out, and I will inform you of his crime.”

Marius waited until there was a slight relaxing of straining muscles. Neither man would be the first to step back, however. Marius raised his hands, daring to touch both of their chests. He gently pushed them away from each other. He wanted to let his hands linger, to enjoy the feeling of strength just behind Titus’s leather tunic and Kasen’s breastplate. But he forced himself to remove his palms, thinking *soon*.

“Titus and I will take our leave. You will excuse us, yes?” Although he had phrased it as such, it hadn’t been a question. Sertorius finally took several more steps back, allowing them to pass without incident. Marius was well aware of the tension between the two men as they passed one another. The sneers on their faces gave a visible clue to anyone with eyes. But nothing more was said. Marius stepped into his coach, and they began the journey to his home outside the city.

Kasen returned to his quarters after the patrol. As legate, he didn’t have to join the patrols. He simply liked to do so on occasion to remind the city of his presence. But today he’d gone with the patrol purely for personal reasons. He’d heard that the gladiator was in the employ of the new quaestor. He wanted to see him. That is, he wanted to see that the man was causing no trouble. Kasen removed his cloak and armour, placing them on their stand. He admitted to himself that the man had looked good in his new role. He’d been cleaned of the dirt and blood Kasen normally saw him covered in. His tunic was of good quality, topped by thick leather to protect his broad chest. More of him had been covered than was in his brief gladiator’s costume, but Kasen could find no fault with what he could see of the man’s muscular arms and thick thighs. His hair had been tamed and his jaw scrapped clean of rough beard. He’d looked both respectable and intimidating. And Kasen wanted him.

Kasen planted his fists on the table, his head hanging low in shame. How could he want someone who represented a thing that he hated? He did not approve of the gladiators nor their brutal sport. And he despised that many of them became heroes for their ability to kill, as Titus had. But still, thoughts of the man continued to visit him in the night. And when he called for a camp follower to serve his needs, it was Titus he imagined thrusting into. For months he’d been fantasising of Titus allowing him to touch and explore the strength of his body. He didn’t want to take anything from Titus. He wanted him to submit willingly for Kasen to slide his cock deep inside him. Unfortunately, he doubted such would ever come to pass. Especially with the way they continued to antagonise each other whenever they met. But if things were different, if they were different people, he would jump at the chance to be with a man such as Titus Vitruvius.

And now the gladiator was the bodyguard of a newcomer to their city, Lucien Marius Petronius. The two men couldn’t be more different. Titus was a big beast of a man. While Petronius was gentle and soft looking. He was

handsome, but it was the wicked glint in his eyes that had grabbed Kasen's attention. The contrast between the two of them had been very intriguing as he watched them leave, Titus using his larger size to shield his patron as they walked. An image flashed into his mind of the slender Petronius between the larger bodies of Titus and himself. Both of them had calloused hands from hours of training with weapons. He imagined Petronius's delicate shivers as they ran their rough hands over his fine skin. Kasen groaned in frustration. These thoughts needed to be banished from his head. He couldn't have Titus because he didn't want to make of himself a hypocrite. And he couldn't have Petronius because the man was high born while Kasen had worked his way through the ranks of the Roman army. Pushing himself away from the table, he walked to the opening of his tent. Kasen sent one of the guards there to summon one of the more seasoned veterans in his ranks. An hour of sparring ought to exhaust him and take his mind off fucking two men that he knew he could never have.

Titus followed his patron into the villa. On the outside he was calm. But on the inside he seethed. How dare that self-righteous prick show up and cast doubt upon his character? He had done nothing to warrant such harassment from the man. After their fight in the barn, he had been prepared to move on from any further conflict with the legate. Apparently Sertorius was not of the same mind. He had no doubt that the soldier had sought him out just to see for himself if he was indeed in the employ of Marius Petronius. He could not allow Sertorius to cost him this position. He needed every bit of coin he could earn. Although, this evening he hoped to spare a few to be relieved of his need. He needed it even more after the blood pumping confrontation he'd had with Sertorius. He stopped his patron before he could disappear to his private quarters.

"Petronius. With your permission, I seek leave to go into the city this evening."

Petronius turned, a look of suspicion upon his handsome face. "You do not intend to seek out Sertorius?"

"No. I have no need to avenge today's slight by the legate. I have other needs I would see fulfilled this evening."

Comprehension flashed across Petronius's face. "Ah! I understand." He hesitated for a moment. "Unfortunately, I am afraid I cannot spare you this night."

Titus fought to keep from clenching his fists in frustration. “As you wish.” He gave a slight bow and took his leave. He set off to train in the courtyard even though he would have to work on his own. The need for sex and his lust, *blood lust*, for Legate Sertorius would not let him find rest until he’d exhausted himself.

Later that evening, Titus lay upon his cot. It was early yet for slumber, but he’d retired anyway. Tonight’s bath had surely been from hell. Two of the serving boys had bathed him. Their slender bodies brushed repeatedly against his as they rinsed the dust from his hair and washed his body. A few minutes into the exquisite torture, he’d placed a hand upon the thigh of one, surprised when he didn’t pull away. Titus grew bolder, hopeful that the *No* and *I can’t* he’d heard previously would tonight transform into *Yes* and *I can*. He’d squeezed the thigh under his palm gently, pulling the young man closer. The gentle buoyancy of the water aided his cause, easily floating him over until he rested upon Titus’s lap. Titus had groaned, his cock stiffening mightily as it rubbed against the rounded ass nestled against him. Water dripped as he raised his arm from the water to cup the smooth jaw of the young man. He’d just been about to take a kiss when Crispin had interrupted.

His next groan had been one of frustration. The three of them rose from the pool, water streaming down their bodies. As the two young men dried him, he’d tried to make plans to continue their almost kiss later. He wasn’t surprised when the young man shook his head and said, “No. I can’t.”

So here he was, lying naked on his bed, about to spend another evening with only his hand for company. He’d barely began to touch his shaft when he heard the sound of sandalled feet on stone. Titus knew the rhythm of those footsteps. When they stopped just outside his doorway, he knew it was Crispin before he spoke.

“Petronius asks for you.”

Titus sprang from his cot, quickly throwing on his tunic. He yanked the curtain back to see Crispin standing there. “Is everything alright?” The boy nodded yes, but Titus still belted on his weapon before following him. To his surprise, he wasn’t taken to the room where Petronius did most of his business. Crispin continued past until he reached the area that Titus knew was his bedroom. Crispin pulled back the curtain that shielded the innermost area of the bedroom. Marius was there. He reclined upon the bed, clad in a loose white

robe. The fabric gleamed in the candle light, as did the thin golden chains that draped across his chest. His legs and feet were bare. Titus wondered why he'd been brought there. He looked to Crispin, but no answer was forthcoming from the servant. He stood there quietly, his head bowed. His hand was extended in a clear gesture for Titus to go further into the room. Titus moved forward and heard the soft whisper of the curtain moving back into position behind him. The tread of sandals on marble told him that he'd just been left alone with the master of the villa.

“Petronius. Is everything alright? I asked Crispin but he had nothing to tell me.”

“Yes, everything is fine. I but sought your company.” He waved a hand to the small couch across from the bed upon which he lounged. “Sit. There is wine.”

Titus sat slowly. He was both afraid he would break the delicate couch with his bulk and wary of why he'd been summoned to Petronius's private chamber. At Petronius's encouraging nod, Titus reached out and poured himself a cup of wine. He took a healthy drink. “It's good.”

Petronius took a sip from the golden cup in his hand. “Yes it is. You'll find none finer on this earth.” He smiled a smile that Titus thought was rather secretive, and took another sip. “Are you happy here in my employ, Titus?”

“Of course, Petronius. But...” He hesitated, unsure if his next words would be appropriate. “Might I speak plainly?”

“Please do.”

“I am a man with strong appetites. For food. For wine.” He raised his cup in a salute to Petronius. “And for lovers. It has been several weeks since I have satisfied myself with pleasures of the flesh. And it appears as though I will be unable to do so here. With respect, I understand if you don't want me to fraternise with your servants. But I must be given leave to seek my pleasure elsewhere.”

Again Petronius smiled that secretive smile. “Has it occurred to you, Titus, to wonder why none of my servants will lie with you?”

Titus frowned with some confusion. “I just assumed that you instructed them not to lie with one another.”

Petronius laughed. “Oh they lie with one another. They fuck like lustful sheep herders. But I did instruct them to keep their mouths and asses clear of your cock.”

Titus stiffened, thinking that Petronius didn't think he was good enough to touch his property.

"I instructed them so, and they heeded my warning. Because they dare not touch what I have claimed as my own."

Titus choked on the drink he'd just swallowed. "Excuse me, Petronius?"

"You. I have claimed you. Or rather, I would have you claim me."

Titus lowered his cup. "Is this a trick?" He asked, full of suspicion. Perhaps Petronius was testing his motives after Sertorius's comments in the forum.

"No trick. I too have lustful needs. And I would see them met by the man before me."

Surprise that his patron wanted intimacy with him warred with desire at the thought of it. Whether it was foolish or not, desire won. He wanted this man who managed to mix the softness of youth with the power and intelligence of a man in one beautiful form. Blood rushed through Titus, headed straight to his cock. He sat as he usually did, his feet planted wide and his knees spread. The position did nothing to hide his erection, as his tunic rose with it.

Petronius laughed softly. "It would seem that you are interested in seeing both our needs met?" He rose from the bed. "If you would not, be truthful and tell me," Petronius said as he approached the couch.

Titus set his cup back on the table. "I would. But I do not wish to offend."

"You would not. Have I not said that I wish to be claimed by you?" He took Titus hand and brought it to his chest. "I wish to be touched by you."

Titus watched as Petronius moved his hand over his body. He marvelled at the difference between them. His hand was big and dark, the skin rough and dusted with hair. Petronius was smaller, his skin naturally tan, almost golden. And he was smooth and soft; Titus's fingers tingled as they brushed over him. Still unable to believe this was happening, he did nothing more but allow his hand to be guided.

Petronius smiled. "You have two hands, do you not?"

Titus nodded, his throat so thick with rising desire he wasn't sure if he could speak. He brought his other hand up, stroking it up Petronius's thigh underneath the fabric of his robe. He reached a hip and realised Petronius wore nothing beneath the loose robe. Titus groaned, leaning forward to press his

forehead to his stomach. Slipping his hand around, he gently cupped the firm globe of his patron's ass. When he pressed back into his touch, Titus finally realised that this *was* happening. He turned his head so that he could kiss the skin of Petronius's stomach.

"I have wanted you from the moment I saw you. Many a night I have spent into my hand while thinking of you, Petronius."

"Well on this night, you'll be spending inside me. Which I have dreamed about since I first saw you."

Titus groaned and pulled Petronius down to straddle his lap. Now that that were at eye level, he went to kiss him. But Petronius resisted.

"My given name is Marius. I wish for you to use it."

Titus was almost more surprised by this request, but he agreed. "Marius." Now they kissed, Marius already rocking against him. The kiss was hot and demanding on both their parts. Titus continued to squeeze the globes of Marius's ass, keeping him pressed tight against him so that he could feel the hardness of his shaft pressing into his stomach. And Marius kept up with that delightful rocking, using his grip in Titus's hair to stay steady. He pulled back, giving Titus a look at his flushed face and kiss-plump lips.

"To bed," he said.

Titus smiled at the arrogant order. He stood, Marius still in his arms. He took three steps until they were right in front of the bed. Previous fantasies of roughly throwing this man down on the bed sprang to mind. But although he was being given more than he'd ever believed possible, he felt he'd be pushing his luck with all the gods if he were to treat a nobilis so crudely. He lowered Marius gently to the bed. Bracing his hands on the bed, Marius pushed himself back. Titus followed, crawling onto the bed in the space left for him. The bedding was soft beneath his knees, softer than any he'd ever felt. But he wasn't concerned with that. All of his attention was on the man in front of him.

He reached out and grabbed the end of the tie that held the loose robe closed. Titus pulled slowly, purposely torturing himself by building the anticipation. When the sash came loose, the soft material slid open and Marius's nude body was revealed: flat stomach with a hint of ridged muscle and narrow hips with glorious indentions that pointed the way to a thatch of soft looking brown curls. Titus reached out and ran his finger through the bush, discovering it truly was as soft as it appeared. Rising up from it was his slightly

dusky shaft; the pink head appeared from the hood of skin that protected it. His balls were dusted with the same soft hair, and they were already drawn tight and hard. Titus watched as Marius rolled his hips, the movement sending the heavy weight of his erection sliding across his stomach.

“Do you only wish to look?” he whispered.

Titus groaned as Marius rolled his hips again, this time spreading his legs so that the shadowed valley between his ass cheeks was visible too. Titus grabbed himself at the base of his cock. “I seek all. To look. To touch. To taste.”

“Then do so.”

With another groan, Titus lowered himself. He pressed his face into the soft pubic hair, inhaling deeply. “You smell of rich and wicked passion.” Turning his head, he flicked his tongue out to run it along the length of his lover’s shaft. He reached the tip, sliding his tongue across it to get a taste of the essence beaded there. Titus moaned. “And you taste of ambrosia,” he whispered. He looked to Marius to see him watching with desperate eyes. He didn’t have to be an oracle to predict what that look meant. He parted his lips and sucked the gorgeous shaft into his mouth. Titus moaned at the taste and the feel as he slid his lips up and down on Marius’s cock. He opened his eyes to see Marius rolling his hips in rhythm with his movements. Titus’s cock throbbed as he realised Marius was no passive lover. He pulled away for the briefest of moments to suck a finger into his mouth. When it was wet, he pressed it against his lover’s entrance, flicking his tongue against the head of his cock as he did so. He watched to see if there would be any protest. There wasn’t, so he pushed it in, slowly, while he sucked him down again. Marius wrapped his legs around his neck and gripped his hair, holding him in place. Titus growled his approval at the show of aggression. He pressed his finger in deeper and sucked harder, making Marius moan loudly. Titus soaked up the scent and sounds of their lovemaking until he was nigh dizzy with it. He pulled back. “I cannot wait a moment more to be inside you.”

Marius squeezed his inner muscles on the finger Titus had inside him. “Nor I,” he replied in a voice gone deep with passion.

Titus shuddered as he imagined that grip on his cock instead of a finger. It was with some reluctance that he pulled out of his lover. But it faded almost immediately as he covered his shaft in the oil Marius passed to him from a chest near the bed. Once he was prepared, he lowered his hips until the thick head of his shaft was pressed to Marius’s entrance.

“Do not hesitate,” Marius said.

Titus groaned and pushed forward, going deep until his entire cock was gripped by the tightness of his lover’s ass. He planted his hands on the bed, bracing himself as he pulled his hips away and then thrust back in. “By the gods,” he whispered, “I could never have imagined pleasure like this.” Again he pulled his hips back. He was mindful of his superior strength, but only just barely as he thrust back in hard. Marius moaned and reached his hands up to stroke over Titus’s chest.

“More,” he demanded.

Titus smiled at the command but did as ordered. He set a deep, driving rhythm that had them both moaning and cursing at the pleasure of it. Marius’s hands moved to grip his shoulders, pulling him down until hot slick skin pressed to hot slick skin. Marius wrapped his arms and legs around Titus and held him with surprising strength, working his hips just as hard to take his pleasure as Titus was working to give it.

The heat between them rose as their climaxes fast approached. Marius slipped one hand between them to grip his shaft, pumping himself in time with Titus’s thrusts.

“I will not last much longer,” he gasped desperately.

Titus pumped his hips harder while he took his lover’s mouth in a deep, demanding kiss. Marius kissed him back for long moments, his tongue swirling and licking at his. But then he tore his mouth away, his head pressing back into the pillows. He gave a loud cry as he came, and his back arched, streams of his release arcing from his shaft to splash his sweaty chest and tightly clenched stomach. At the height of his passion he almost seemed to glow. Though Titus was entranced with the sight, he continued to drive his hips forward until his own climax was upon him. He came with a throaty roar, his body bursting to release what had been pent-up inside him for so long.

Titus looked at the man he’d just taken as his lover. He reached out and touched the rough pad of his finger to Marius’s kiss-swollen lips. “I enjoyed this. I’m glad you didn’t give me leave to go into the city.” Marius smiled and bit his finger. Titus laughed. When his finger was free he pushed himself to sit up. “I should return to my quarters.”

Marius put a hand on his chest, attempting to push him back down. “You have satisfied us both this night. A rest upon the softest of bedding is deserved, is it not?”

Titus relaxed, allowing himself to be guided into his previous reclining position. “If that is your wish, Petronius.”

“Marius.”

“If that is your wish, Marius.”

“It is.”

“Then here I shall stay.”

Chapter 5

Marius lay nude in bed. He was fresh from the bath and had chosen not to re-dress that evening. Titus sat on the couch across from him. He wore a bath sheet around his hips as he sharpened his sword. They would be coming together for another night of lovemaking soon, just as they had for the past two weeks. But right now, Marius's mind was elsewhere. He'd spent another day in the forum. The cold kept them short, but in the guise he'd taken on, he had business to attend to every day. Sertorius had shown up again today, though this time he was without his guard. He was alone or with only one or two men more often than not. Marius figured the guard he'd come with that first time had been simply for show. Sertorius stopped by several times a week. Ostensibly it was to check on the city's quaestor. But Marius knew it was really Titus that drew him so frequently, and not merely to harass his personal guard as Titus complained. He saw the way the soldier's eyes roamed over the former gladiator. And unless he was mistaken, which he never was, Sertorius's eyes ran over him with sensuous intent as well. Although Titus had never said anything, he had noticed his lover's shaft fill when conversation turned to the man. Though they hadn't argued or come to blows again, the tension between the two men was still thick and desperately seeking an outlet. Marius decided it was high time he provided it for them. Tonight was the perfect opportunity to put certain thoughts into his lover's head. He looked at Titus sitting there, stroking the stone over the edge of the blade. The muscles in his arms worked fluidly while his big hands gripped stone and pommel with strong surety.

"You have such strength, yet never is it displayed for me."

"I would never use my strength against you," Titus replied without looking up from his task.

Marius smiled. "That is not what I said." He waited until Titus finally looked at him. Then he ran his hand down his chest, tangling his fingers through the pubic hair that he knew Titus loved before gripping his cock. "Every night when we come together our passion is strong. But not as strong and... rough as I know it could be."

Titus took a moment to answer as he was watching Marius stroke his cock. "To show you such roughness would be a dishonour."

Marius barely restrained from snorting at that comment. "Sertorius is a man. I have no doubt that his strength would be amply wielded in bed."

This time the answer was quick. “Do not compare me to him in *any* way.”

“I did not.” Marius got up to pour himself a cup of wine. “But I can see how you would think he is more of a man than you. He leads armies. He knows how to take control.”

“And I do not?”

“You were a gladiator. Not a commander. It stands to reason that Sertorius would be a more manly, aggressive lover than you.”

Titus shot to his feet with a growl. He tossed the sword and stone aside. “Sertorius can lead all the armies he wants. He will still never be more man than me,” he said as he thumped his chest.

Marius shrugged, taking another sip of wine. “I bet he would use his cock on me just like he would any boy he came across in a barn without worry of my station.”

Titus ripped away his bath sheet to reveal his shaft, filled with pulsing blood, the tip wet and leaking with precum. “His cock is not the one that makes you moan so lustily into the night.”

Another shrug. “Maybe it should be.”

This time Titus’s growl propelled him forward until he grabbed Marius by the arms. Titus yanked him forward into a rough and angry kiss. Marius pulled back slightly, turning his head away to taunt him. Titus responded by tightening his hold, pulling him in hard. He spun them around so that Marius’s back was to the bed. Marius was momentarily surprised when his feet left the ground. Titus picked him up and threw him onto the bed. He barely had a chance to realise what had happened before Titus was upon him, grinding his cock hard against his hip and kissing him so deep it stole his breath. His hands clamped again onto his arms, and Marius knew that he would have bruises there on the morrow. He was finally able to speak again when Titus rocked back onto his heels. His cock stood straight up, clear rivers of precum spilling from the tip.

“Look how hard you are. What has caused this?” Marius sat up and reached a finger out to dip and swirl through the liquid. “Is it the thoughts of Sertorius that bring such ardour? Perhaps the thought of that soldier’s thick cock in my ass, fucking me like you are unable to do?”

“Shut up!” Titus snarled.

He yanked Marius up, forcing his legs around so that he straddled his lap. Marius relaxed as he felt the head of his lover’s cock pushing against his

entrance, but he didn't stop his goading. "Perhaps I would need to take both of you at the same time to truly know who is the strongest." Titus groaned, and Marius smiled. "The thought intrigues you, lover?" Titus didn't answer. He just grit his teeth, a muscle jumping in the hard line of his jaw. He pushed in further and Marius held back a gasp at the stretch and burn as he was filled. "Still. Maybe the best way for you to understand Sertorius's strength is for him to fuck..." He paused drawing out the moment. Titus ceased to move but Marius could feel his shaft pulsing in his ass. He smiled and finished "...you."

Titus roared louder than ever before, his hands clamping tight onto Marius's hips. Those broad fingers dug into his flesh as he raised him before slamming him back down. He did it again and again, forcing his cock into Marius's ass with his powerful thighs. Marius wrapped his arms around Titus, hanging on as the big man gave him a rougher ride than ever before. It hurt some, and he knew that he would be sore after. But he cared not at all. He took the brutal pounding, even encouraging Titus to give him more with desperately voiced whispers.

He leaned back some, and Titus's hands moved down to cup his ass. The new angle sent the thickness of Titus's cock sliding across that gland deep inside him that brought such pleasure. His breath caught in his throat, and his balls drew up tight and hard. He just barely managed to keep his voice from calling upon the gods as humans were prone to do when they reached their peak. The last thing he wanted was for one of his fellow Olympians to show up on a lark. Instead he threw his head back, calling out his lover's name in a loud shout. He exploded in a burst of sensation that momentarily robbed him of the abilities to see or speak. Seconds after he'd wet his belly with his seed, Titus swore mightily as he pumped the heat of his release inside him.

Marius hung there, letting Titus support nearly all of his weight. Titus stayed on his knees, holding him up while they both caught their breath. Eventually he lowered them to the bed and they lay there facing each other. Titus stroked a hand over his hair.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Some." The beginnings of a frown started to crease Titus's brow. "And I look forward to the day you do it again." His words smoothed the frown away, and Titus smiled.

"Now that I know you wished to be fucked like a stable boy instead of a pampered, soft nobilis I will be sure to do so."

“I’ve asked dinner to be brought to the courtyard this evening.”

After weeks of being Marius’s lover, Titus had grown so comfortable with him that he had no qualms questioning his decision. “The night is too cold to lounge and eat with comfort.”

Marius smiled. “A fire has been built and will chase the chill away.”

Titus pulled Marius close. “A fire will help. But to make sure you don’t take cold, I shall hold you in my lap and feed you.”

“The last time you said you’d feed me, I soon found myself with a mouth stuffed full of cock.”

Titus bellowed a laugh. He truly enjoyed Marius. Though he was a noble, he had a salty humour and was often more crass than Titus himself. In the forum he was always proper and respectful in his public role as quaestor. But here in his home, he showed his true self: earthy and bawdy, but always with a vein of power running throughout.

Titus followed him out to the courtyard. A fire was already crackling. And Marius was dressed warmly, wrapped in lamb’s wool as always. Still, Titus pulled him down onto his lap so that they could share a couch. They sat there nestled together as the servants brought out the prepared food. Their affair was known to everyone in the villa, so there was no need to hide. The draping around Marius’s bed did nothing to hide their lusty shouts and cries every night. Titus had noticed a change in the way the others treated him. They were more respectful, as though he were master of the villa too. But he didn’t seek to take advantage of it. He knew their relationship was solely at the will of Marius. To assume otherwise would be foolish. And to assume he would have any lasting privilege because of it was foolish as well. He simply enjoyed this time he was sharing with Marius now, expecting nothing more. When their time together was up, he would travel south, but he would always look back upon this with fond memories.

“Here, have some meat.” Marius raised an eyebrow, and Titus choked back a laugh. “I swear upon the face of Jupiter, my tunic will stay lowered until the meal is finished.”

“Disappointing,” Marius said. But he leaned forward and ate the slice of meat in Titus’s fingers.

Titus was reaching for another when he heard people approaching. At first he thought nothing of it, until he realised the step of booted feet accompanying

the servant was unlike the soft sandalled steps of everyone in the villa. He looked over his shoulder just as a voice bellowed.

“What in the name of Jupiter is going on here?”

Titus sprang up from the couch. He was mindful to carefully set Marius aside before he turned to face Legate Kasen Sertorius.

“We are having dinner,” Marius calmly answered.

“Why is he here?” Titus asked a question of his own.

“Because I invited him,” Marius answered.

“Petronius, I knew that he would take advantage of you. I will have him escorted from your home and the city this very night.”

Marius frowned at Sertorius. “You will not. He does nothing that I do not wish him to do.”

Now Sertorius looked confused. “You allow him to treat you with such familiarity?”

“It is both allowed and encouraged as I treat him in the same manner.”

Sertorius’s green eyes moved back to him. Titus saw confusion and anger in that gaze, but he also glimpsed a bit of jealousy. It was only there for a moment, but it had him giving the soldier a smug grin. Sertorius stepped forward, his hand on the handle of his blade. Titus was weaponless, but he stepped forward just as aggressively. If it was a fight the soldier wanted, he would get it whether or not he was armed.

Marius stopped things from escalating. “You will both sit.”

The two of them stood there glaring at each other for a long moment until Marius spoke again in a voice sharp with command.

“I said sit!”

Now they moved, though it was with obvious reluctance. Sertorius took a seat on the other side of the table. Titus sat back down on the couch he’d lounged on earlier. He didn’t pull Marius back onto his lap, though his lover did sit beside him. There were no servants about, and Marius told them to serve themselves. Titus ate, but the meal was the most tense he’d ever partaken of. Only Marius seemed relaxed. He talked of the weather, the price of grain, and the need to rebuild the roads leading into the city. But Titus and Sertorius barely participated in the conversation. They continued to glare at each other,

only breaking gazes when Marius addressed them directly or to reach for more food.

“I have given this situation much thought. And I believe I have the solution to your problem.”

Titus started, finally breaking free of the staring contest. He looked at Marius. “What?”

“This tension between the two of you. It must be eased.”

He looked at Sertorius again. It would be eased when one of them finally got the best of the other in physical combat. From the look the legate was giving him, Titus knew he was thinking the same thing.

“The two of you must fight until a winner is declared. Only then will you be able to let go of this feud.”

Titus turned back to his lover, surprised that he’d been thinking the same thing. “You would condone this?”

Marius nodded, an odd look gleaming in his eyes. “Yes. I only ask that both of you strip down to your tunics.” He smiled that secret smile of his. “To make sure that no one has an advantage of weapons or armour, of course.”

Titus looked at Sertorius. “I will fight. If the legate will accept the challenge.”

For his answer, Sertorius stood and began removing his armour. Titus smiled, stripping down to his loincloth. It was how he’d trained and fought as a gladiator. He would fight the same way tonight, regardless of the cold. Sertorius hesitated for only a moment before he removed everything except for his loin cloth as well. The two of them strode over to a cleared area, eyeing each other the whole time. By unspoken agreement, they waited until Marius clapped his hands and called out “Begin!”

They didn’t waste any time. They lunged at each other. Sertorius gained the upper hand first, catching Titus with a hard punch to his gut. The breath whooshed out of Titus, but he still managed to come up with an uppercut to Sertorius’s jaw, sending him stumbling back. The legate quickly regained his footing. Again they came at each other, trading furious blows, blocking what they could, always seeking the advantage. They grunted and cursed, muscles straining, skin growing slick with sweat as they battled. Neither of them would give. Each of them was determined to emerge as the dominant one.

They were in a lock-up when Titus hooked a foot behind Sertorius's ankle and kicked out. The move took Sertorius by surprise, and he went down, landing flat on his back. Titus jumped on top of him. He tangled their legs together and used the grip of his thighs to stay locked into his position. He looked down at his opponent. Dirt clung to his sweaty skin and once neat hair, and a bruise marred his jaw. Titus smiled in anticipation of his victory. He was hard, but he attributed that to the excitement of the fight. Until Sertorius bucked his hips, trying to dislodge him. A bolt of pure lust shot through him, and without meaning too, he ground his cock against Sertorius's middle. The green eyes below him widened, and Titus realised what he'd done. Furious at himself, he raised his fist, ready to deliver the blow that would end this feud once and for all.

"Stop!" Marius cried out. "Do not!" he continued as Titus looked at him in disbelief.

"*Aaargh!*" Titus bellowed in sheer frustration. Was he never to be allowed the satisfaction of besting this man? He lowered his hand. "Why do you stop us?"

"I was mistaken. There is a better way to solve the problem." He rose from his perch on the couch and approached them both. "Rise," he ordered softly.

Titus glared down at Sertorius one final time before he got off him and stood. After a moment, the soldier rose as well, brushing dirt off his chest. They stood before Marius, who'd come even closer.

"You two could fight until someone was declared the victor." He put a hand upon both their chests, watching the rise and fall of their heaving breaths. "But that wouldn't truly satisfy you."

Titus stiffened as Marius leaned in to kiss him. He remembered all too well the night that the mention of Sertorius's name had resulted in their explosive love making. He pulled away from the softness of his lover's lips. "What game do you play, Marius?"

"No game. Just my suspicions of what will truly end this feud between you." He turned to Sertorius, who'd remained still and quiet throughout their exchange.

Titus watched as Marius leaned forward slowly, giving the man time to pull away. He didn't. And soon their lips met in an exploratory kiss. Titus wasn't surprised that Sertorius didn't reject him. Marius was a beautiful man. And he'd

seen the jealousy in the soldier's eyes earlier that evening. Unfortunately, now that jealousy was making its way into his veins as their kiss grew deeper. He started to protest, regardless of whether or not they were in a higher class than him. Marius was his. It rankled to see Sertorius kissing him. But perhaps... he might be jealous of Marius too. But just as he opened his mouth, Marius slid his hand down from his chest to grasp his shaft through his loin cloth. The words of protest were pushed aside by a groan of pleasure as his lover stroked him just the way he liked. It was strange to be so aroused with confusion and jealousy still heavy in his thoughts. He was tempted to break away, but deep down, he knew he wanted Sertorius. So he stayed, allowing the touch while he watched with narrowed eyes as Sertorius kissed *his* lover.

Still kissing Sertorius, Marius pumped him until Titus's blood was humming with passion and desire rather than anger and aggression. Marius ended his kiss with Sertorius, and Titus saw that the other man's passion had shifted just as his had. Sertorius spoke for the first time since Marius had ended the fight.

“What do you want from us, Petronius?”

“First, I wish for you to call me Marius, as Titus does. Second, I want you both to channel your energy into more satisfactory pursuits. Your anger and arguments will lead you nowhere. But the passion that I can *feel* between you, that will lead to something worthwhile.”

Again Marius kissed him and then Sertorius. Then Titus. Each time he switched from one set of lips to another, he drew the men in closer. Titus knew what Marius was trying to make happen. He did nothing to stop it, and neither did Sertorius. When they were close enough, Marius kissed them at the same time. Then he pulled back. He placed a finger on each of their jaws, using gentle pressure to get them to face each other. His blood pumping, his chest heaving, Titus turned fully to look at Sertorius. He was in the same state, his eyes bright with desire. They moved at the same time, their lips crashing together in a kiss that gave no quarter. Lips parted for seeking tongues that sought desperately to taste and give and conquer. As he brought his hands up to roughly hold on to the man he'd thought he hated, Titus realised Marius was right. This was why the two of them never got along. Their hatred was merely a disguise for the powerful attraction they felt for one another.

Marius dropped to his knees before them. They separated as he began unwinding the brief bits of cloth that covered them. Their cocks were revealed, both thick, flushed deeply with pulsing blood, the tips slick.

“You are magnificent males.” He rubbed his smooth cheek first over Sertorius’s shaft then Titus’s. “I would spend time exploring you both. But I feel neither of you would last through such efforts.” He softly sucked at the heads of each of their cocks in turn, earning groans from them both before rising back to his feet. Marius leaned up to whisper in Titus’s ear.

“Remember what I said that night?”

Titus knew immediately the night he meant. “You said many things that night.”

“True. But you know of what I speak. Of having Kasen’s cock inside of you.”

Titus bit back a groan. “But I have nearly bested him. Twice.”

Marius shook his head. “This has nothing to do with besting each other in physical combat. It is about what you desire. And you enjoyed it when *I* did it to you.”

Titus looked at Kasen. What Marius said was true. For the first time, he had allowed another man inside his ass. He had loved the way it felt, letting Marius be in control, feeling his gorgeous cock sliding into him so smoothly. Would he feel the same with Kasen?

“You wish to fuck me?” Titus baldly asked.

Kasen smiled at the coarse question. Did he want to fuck Titus? “I lust for it more than a satyr longs for a nymph.” He looked at Marius. “As I long to be inside of you too, Marius.”

Marius smiled before stepping away. He produced a vial of what Kasen knew was oil and a large lamb’s wool rug. He spread the rug out near the fire and placed the vial atop it. Marius disrobed and then kneeled on the rug. “Come,” he said as he gestured to them.

In near unison, they joined Marius on the lamb’s wool. Marius reached for them, and the three of them came together in a sensual whirlwind of kisses and caresses. Oil was poured over all of their cocks, making them glisten in the firelight. Hands stroked and moans arose, creating a symphony of desire. Kasen guided Titus up on his knees, taking position behind him. Kasen knew that this might not be easy for Titus. It was one thing to be the dominant lover as he suspected Titus had been with Marius. It was another to be the more submissive

one. Kasen took his time, caressing Titus everywhere and praising him for his strength. He stroked Titus's cock for long moments while slipping a finger inside him, getting Titus as aroused as possible for what would happen. Eventually, the tension in the big body in front of him eased, and Titus relaxed back against him. Still, Kasen knew there was one more thing he had to do.

"I apologise for my transgressions against you, Titus Vitruvius. I didn't hate you. I just didn't realise how much I wanted you." He pressed a kiss to the back of Titus's neck, hoping his words were understood.

Titus looked over his shoulder at him, gratitude upon his handsome face. "I forgive you, as I hope you forgive me."

Kasen nodded, this time pressing his kiss to his lover's lips. As they kissed, he grasped his cock and eased into Titus's entrance. He was tight but relaxed and welcoming. Kasen began his thrusts, his breath catching in his throat at the maddeningly delicious pleasure he felt. Titus felt the same if the deep groan and fingers that reached back to dig into Kasen's hips were any indication. Kasen watched over his shoulder as Marius bent and took Titus's shaft into his mouth, stroking himself off at the same time. It was beautiful, and the sight and sound of it aroused Kasen to heights he'd never experienced before.

Kasen increased the pace and power of his thrusts, taking what Titus so generously gave him. His balls tightened and his cock throbbed inside the clenching heat that gripped him. Kasen pressed his lips to Titus's ear, his fingers coming up to pinch his nipples. "I die inside you, Titus Vitruvius," he whispered.

Titus groaned, tightening his grip. He slammed his hips back then forward, shouting out as his climax ripped through him. The moan Kasen heard below brought his eyes to Marius. His body shook, letting Kasen know that he too was climaxing. Kasen could hold back no longer. He let go; his release was so powerful that it took his breath away, spilling his seed deep inside the man he'd once counted enemy, but now held close as his lover.

Later they lay in Marius's bed. The cool night air upon their sweaty bodies had finally driven them inside. They'd walked naked through the villa, which had been empty of servants. Not that any of them would have cared. Now they lay entwined; soft linens tossed over their bodies. More love making would come, of that Marius had no doubt. But for now, they talked, getting to know one another.

“I let my prejudice for the gladiatorial games influence my perception of you. That’s why I couldn’t seem to stop antagonising you. Along with a good deal of sexual tension,” Kasen said as he looked down at Marius lying between them.

Marius simply smiled. It was a bit smug to be sure, but he refrained from saying anything.

“Then I must admit to jealousy of you. I never expected to be a gladiator. I planned to join the legions. But my father...” Titus trailed off, cleared his throat, and started again. “My father caused great offence for which he could not repay. I was sold to cover that debt. I was determined not to die in that arena, and if that meant that I had to maim or kill everyone I faced, then I would gladly do so. But I never enjoyed it.” Titus shrugged with clear acceptance for the path his life had taken. “I envied your lofty position as legate.”

Marius looked from one to the other. Kasen looked shamefaced while Titus made eye contact with neither of them. Marius determined to lighten the mood. “Shall I force the two of you to kiss again?”

Titus laughed, and Kasen shook his head. “No force is necessary,” he said.

Marius watched as they leaned over him and kissed. It was gentler than the furiously passionate ones they shared in the courtyard, but Marius enjoyed seeing it just as much. When they broke apart they both looked down and spied his self-satisfied expression.

“How much of this did you plan, Marius?”

“More than you know,” he replied.

Neither of his men seemed bothered by his answer. They laughed softly, their big, rough hands continuing to caress him. Marius smiled to himself. This was what he’d wanted. And now that he had it, he intended to stay with his two passionate mortals for as long as the Fates allowed.

“...And after that first night, the two mortals and the god grew to love one another. Titus chose to stay in Aquileia rather than going south to become a farmer. And Marius used his influence, as well as a good deal of coin, to end Kasen’s military term early. They had many happy years together, laughing and fighting and making up as only true soul mates can. Mars never revealed his secret to his two lovers, but in every other way he stayed true to them until their

life threads were cut by Atropos. When they were gone, he grieved deeply for many years.” Andronicus ended his tale. He looked out over the guests and saw all of their attention was still rapt upon him. That made him smile. He loved when people were so involved with his stories. One of the bacchi dared to speak.

“Bard, what of after Titus and Kasen’s deaths? What did Mars do then?”

“Mars saw them safely into the Elysian Fields before returning to Olympus. He has been there ever since.”

The woman put her hand to her breast, just above her heart. “That leaves me with sadness, bard. I had hoped that Mars would take them to Olympus with him.”

Andronicus smiled again. “No mortal, no matter how greatly they are loved, can reside upon Olympus. But as Mars proved, gods can live anywhere. Even in places where the souls of humans rest.”

Another reveller spoke up. “Then he should go there!”

This brought gentle laughter from the crowd, and the hushed atmosphere after the story’s end was broken. Barrius stood. Andronicus noted that he was holding on to the young man he’d sat with a little tighter. Perhaps there was love there, and his tale would help it to flourish.

“Thank you Andronicus, for entertaining us with your gift of storytelling. We have much enjoyed it.” He snapped his fingers, and a servant came forward with a pouch.

When Andronicus took it, he easily felt that it was heavily laden with coin. He bowed to Barrius. “I accept with gratitude.”

Barrius swept his arm out to indicate the festivities that were underway once more. “Please, stay and avail yourself of my hospitality.”

Andronicus smiled. “I am thankful, but I must go.” He bowed again and made his way through the crowd.

Epilogue

Andronicus stepped back out into the night. He'd left the revellers well satisfied with his tale. Coins were pressed into his hand, and pleas from guests to come to their feasts to tell stories rang in his ears before he'd taken his leave. Most of the requests he would ignore. Only a select few would be lucky enough to have him.

Music and voices still mixed with the sounds of the night. But most of the candles along the path were burned down to nothing as he set back the way he'd come hours before. Before he'd gone too far away from the villa, he felt a presence behind him. A voice came out of the darkness.

"I have asked you to cease telling that story."

Andronicus recognised that voice. He stopped, but did not turn around.

"Why do you persist?" The question was asked in a tone of annoyed exasperation with a hint of sadness hidden beneath.

"Because it is a good tale, one that brings joy to all who hear of it." He turned to face the tall, dark-haired figure behind him. "The mighty god of war falling in love with two mortals. They all dream to be favoured so."

Mars stepped towards him. One of the remaining lit candles on the path revealed his hard expression. "Well, none will be so favoured. At least, not by me."

"Because you still have love in your warrior's heart for your cherished mortals."

Mars frowned. "I am a god. I do not love two mortals who have long passed into the afterlife."

"And yet you ensured that they both were safely seen directly into Elysium, rather than being judged by Pluto. That is quite the debt to shoulder for two souls you don't love." Andronicus quietly watched the god. Mars stared off into the distant night sky, saying nothing. "You have been seen watching them from the edge of the Fields for nearly a hundred years. Why do you not approach?"

"I would not taint their cherished memories." Mars still tried to hide it, but the sadness had become more evident in his voice. "Surely that is what would happen if I were to reveal myself as Marius."

Andronicus lay a gentle hand on the god's arm. "No. They miss you. Love forgives all, and they would be full of joy to be reunited with you, no matter the form you take."

Mars finally stopped staring at the sky and glared at him. "Don't you have a milk maid's wish to be noticed by the town hero to grant?"

Andronicus laughed. He shook off the guise of the bard, revealing himself to be Venus, goddess of Love. "I am sure I do. I will always help those who need assistance in affairs of the heart. Including my stubborn brother." Venus took a step back and waved her arm. She faded from sight, leaving Mars on his own.

Mars watched Venus disappear, before he too removed himself from the path. But he didn't return to Olympus. Instead he went to Elysium. There, across fields of gently waving grasses, he saw the two men he had taken as his lovers. Kasen and Titus. They were together as always, engaged in a friendly round of sparring. He knew that they were happy. But he also knew that they continued to await the arrival of Marius. Time did not move the same here in Elysium as on Earth. So they had no idea it had been one hundred years since they'd seen the third in their relationship.

Venus was right. He did come here often to watch the two men. But he had never done more than that. Should he go forth and reveal himself? As he stood there deciding, he realised his hesitance was that of a coward. That thought didn't sit well with the god of war. He took a deep breath, remembering the passion and love the three of them had shared. He donned the guise he hadn't worn for a hundred years and then set forth across the field.

The clanging of swords hid the sound of his footsteps, but Titus spied him before he could get their attention. He dropped his sword, a look of joy upon the face returned to its youthful handsomeness.

"Marius!"

Kasen spun around at Titus's shout. He too called out his name. His sword fell to the ground with a thump, and the two men rushed to meet him halfway. Strong arms pulled him into a warm embrace, big hands stroked his hair. Mars relaxed, comforted by their fondly remembered touch.

"Finally you are here, Marius. We were beginning to worry," Kasen said.

Mars looked up at his two lovers with a frown upon his brow. Spirits were to be at peace in Elysium. Emotions like worry were unheard of here. “You worried for me?”

Titus nodded. “Yes. Once we realised that enough time had passed for your natural life to reach its end, we truly began our wait for you. When time continued to pass without your arrival in the Fields, we worried that your soul rested elsewhere because you were not a warrior.”

Kasen cut in. “But we held faith that the gods would not let such a distinction keep us separated in the afterlife.”

Mars felt both guilt that he had caused them worry and surprise that they were so cognisant of things outside of Elysium. He’d never heard of anyone in Elysium being so aware when the plane was created to make mortals forget all their earthly woes. He knew he had to tell the truth. “I have a confession to make. One that might turn your joy for my arrival into hatred for my face.”

Titus raised an eyebrow in a look of smug knowing. “Did you lay with another after our deaths? Fear not, we have discussed this and determined it is no cause for anger. We well remember your lusty appetite and would not expect you to live the rest of your life chaste as a Vestal Virgin.”

Kasen laughed in agreement but Mars did not. “No, that is not my confession.” He stepped back out of the circle of their arms. “After keeping this secret for so long, I realise it is best to just reveal all at once.” He took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before he exhaled. As he breathed out, the familiar disguise of Marius was replaced by the true figure of Mars. He opened his eyes and saw his two lovers standing there, shock upon their faces. Mars waited, expecting their rejection.

“You... You are Mars, god of war.” Titus stated with a hint of awe in his voice.

He nodded.

“You kept this a secret all the years we lived together.” This was from Kasen.

Mars nodded again. Titus and Kasen looked at each other, a wordless exchange passing between them.

“You undertook this deception to bring us together, did you not?”

Mars answered Kasen, though he looked back and forth between both men. “Yes. The passion and fury you two displayed whenever you met drew my

attention again and again. And once I had you both, I wanted to remain with you.” He shrugged. “So I did.”

The two were quiet for a moment before Titus grinned. “You hear that Sertorius? I drew the attention of a god.”

Kasen scoffed. “He said he was drawn to us both.”

“But he came to me first. That means he was drawn mostly to me.”

The two started a good-natured though passionate argument, just as they always had on Earth. And Mars intervened, just as he always had. “You two are welcome to argue over this later. Right now, I wish to know if you want me to take my leave.”

Kasen and Titus looked at him with matching expressions of confusion on their faces. “Why would we want that?” Kasen asked.

“I deceived you. I am a god, not mortal. Nor am I soft as I pretended to be.”

Titus reached a hand out, lacing their fingers together. Their hands were the same size now, and Mars stood slightly taller than both men. But he still felt just as cherished as he had during the life he had lived with them.

“Was the love you felt for us a pretence?”

“No.”

Titus looked at Kasen, who nodded. “Then that is all that matters.”

“We have waited for you. We would not turn you away now that you are taller and have unruly hair,” Kasen said.

Titus smiled and reached out to touch his hair. Mars was relieved that he didn’t seem hesitant to touch him now that he’d been revealed as a god.

“We might have to take some time to figure out the dynamics of how things are going to work between us—”

“Titus! Now isn’t the time to talk of sex.”

Titus arched a brow. “That isn’t what I meant. Though now we know where your mind is.”

Kasen blushed, and Mars laughed. He had missed the banter between these two.

“But we will be together,” Titus finished.

Kasen again nodded in agreement, and they both reached for him.

Mars accepted the hug they drew him into. It was different than before with the change in his size. But it felt just as good as it had a hundred years ago. And now he knew that he would forever be welcomed within their embrace.

The End

Author Bio

Christa Tomlinson is an exciting up and coming author in erotic romance. Her first self-published novel, The Sergeant, was an Amazon Best Seller for Gay and Lesbian Erotica for seven weeks straight.

Although Christa graduated from The University of Missouri-St. Louis with a degree in History, she prefers to write contemporary romance. She loves to create stories that are emotional and lovely with sex that is integral to the characters' romantic arc. Her books include straight couples, curvy couples, gay, and multicultural couples. Love is love and everyone should have their story told.

Christa lives in Houston, Texas with her two dogs, and is a semi-retired member of Houston Roller Derby. She enjoys hearing from readers. You can follow her on Twitter at [@christa_writes](#) and on Facebook at [Christa Tomlinson](#). For more on Christa's work, including deleted scenes, excerpts, and free reads, visit [ChristaTomlinson.Blogspot.com](#)

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