

*Sanctum
Liberterra
Snakepit*

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen... to the Snakepit!” the booming voice of the stadium crier echoed around the arena.

Mary and her husband, Jotu, listened as the announcer repeated the building’s history, same as each day’s events began. His words were faint as they carried over the stone walls to those waiting in line to get in. The couple had heard the speech before having been frequent visitors to the coliseum. They knew the day it was erected after a mighty battle between Tombstone and the last remnants of the Minotaur resistance led by Laurinaitis Salvatore. It was the final conflict that Minotaur had engaged in on an open field in Liberterra; the defeat was so heavy that the battle was now often remembered as the day the hills ran red. Butcher crushed Salvatore’s weak army, leading a legion of screamers and Tombstone warriors to an easy victory. After routing his opponent and capturing a small percentage of the retreating forces, Butcher declared that he wasn’t finished with watching men die. He ordered the former allies to turn on each other in a final battle to the death; the last one standing was promised his or her freedom. Any that refused were filled with arrows. Left with no choice, the former friends and family turned on each other and a bloodbath ensued. Emerging victorious in the end was a man named Gregorius, an imposing figure that wielded a two-handed claymore sword. Butcher kept his promise and even recruited Gregorius to his ranks. Dark Snake loved Butcher’s idea so much when she heard of what happened that she started the construction of the Snakepit, a great building made of jet-black rock found along the Moanatenger coastline. It was designed in the shape of a snake coiled into a ball ready to strike out and inflict pain like the leadership it was erected by. Within, rows of seats looked down onto a muddy pit for spectators to enjoy the fights as a sport and bet on the winners. Those captured or found to be plotting against Tombstone were sent there in order to try to win their freedom. Despite the promise of being released, no one had ever seen a fighter discharged since Gregorius, the day the sport was conceived. That wasn’t a problem for Mary or Jotu, though; they didn’t attend the events to see men and women freed, they watched for the blood, sweat and brutality. The couple passed through the entrance, moulded like a serpent’s head with two torches burning in the eye cavities and a luxurious red carpet rolled out for the snake’s tongue. There was a charge on entry, either a silver coin or information on Minotaur rebels. Mary and Jotu never paid in coins being poor subsistence farmers, however, they were rich in rebel information having founded a fake resistance group in their village. Those foolish enough to sign up were the ones that paid for entry each week. It was remarkable that the couple could still use the trickery after so long but the desperation of the Liberterra population was such that they often engaged in mindless activity without thinking. To help their cause, Mary was an attractive lady that could easily persuade the male populous of the village to sign their lives away and Jotu was a believable rebel due to his past. He formally fought for Laurinaitis under the Minotaur banner; nevertheless, after being on the battlefield the day the hills ran red, he gave up the fight and turned his coat.

“I’ll find us some seats,” Jotu told his wife whilst she went off in search of refreshments.

A short while later Mary sat down beside her partner and passed him a tankard of ale along with a vegetable pie. They had joined the audience mid-way through a fight between a fully armoured Tombstone veteran soldier and a bareback warrior struggling for freedom. The chain mail of the veteran jangled as he closed down his foe with an outstretched arm brandishing a great two-handed axe. The armourless prey dodged and weaved, looking for an opening to exploit with the dagger he had been given. Feeling like an unstoppable force, the armoured man relentlessly swung at his opponent forcing him to roll, jump and scramble clear. It appeared hopeless for the criminally unequipped gladiator fighting for his freedom, unable to mount an attack for fear of being sliced in

two by the axe head still specked with its previous victim's blood. Suddenly an opportunity presented itself. The axe came crashing down with such speed that the blade jammed in the muddy terrain. Struggling to wriggle it free, the Tombstone fighter moaned and groaned. The crowd roared as the bareback fighter lunged and jabbed the armoured man in his exposed neck. Over and over the dagger entered the exposed flesh as all the pent-up aggression was released on this one weak spot. The assault was a success; the bareback fighter stumbled back and watched blood gushing from the wound and soaking into the mud. Victorious, the man who should rightfully be free could barely celebrate before the metal grate opened and another foe entered. Tombstone wouldn't be undermined. Knowing all too well that the duel wouldn't be over until he was the one dead on the floor, the man had no choice but to prepare for the next contest. He wasted no time in dislodging the mighty axe from the ground and gripping it firmly with both hands. With an animalistic growl he beckoned the next warrior to approach. Once more, the equipment of his opponent far exceeded that which he was provided; lighter leather armour adorned the fighter's body together with a small round shield in one hand and a short sword in the other.

"That's Smeleg," Mary whispered to Jotu. Her partner looked closer and agreed that the newcomer was in fact one of the poor souls they had given up to Tombstone for their entry fee a few weeks previously.

"I hope he wins," Jotu replied. "Come on, Smeleg!" he shouted down into the arena.

The fighter didn't hear, though; from his position on the mud it was all just one raucous noise. Jotu used to be great friends with Smeleg in the village; they worked together in the fields and would look forward to their weekend drinks at the inn after a long week of grinding to survive. That counted for nothing when Smeleg signed up to their fake resistance group, however – all ties were cut and Jotu didn't think twice before handing his former friend over.

The fighter that had acquired the axe after winning the previous battle was receiving the majority of crowd support but Jotu and a few others were cheering Smeleg on. The duel began slowly with neither combatant risking making the first mistake. The duo circled, staring each other down, until Smeleg suddenly pounced and sliced his opponent's arm forcing him to drop his weapon. Wasting no time, Smeleg then mounted his adversary and began bashing away at his face with the metal boss on the front of his shield. He didn't stop until his opponent's head was part of the muddy ground underfoot.

"Yes, Smeleg." Jotu threw an enclosed fist in the air and Mary mirrored his reaction.

"Here comes the next one." Mary pointed at the metal grate opening. Barely had the barrier lifted when the next warrior sprinted into the arena and begun their assault on Smeleg.

"It's a woman," Mary exclaimed, rising from her seat with the excitement of the newcomer's explosive arrival.

"It's an animal," Jotu responded as he gawped at the newest fighter immediately tackling Smeleg to the ground and kicking him repeatedly.

Smeleg never regained his feet after pounding his last victim. The duel was one of the quickest in recent memory when the lady ended it abruptly whilst her sword sliced Smeleg's throat.

Mary realised her hands had risen toward her head in reaction to the rapid display. As she lowered them back to her sides she took in the figure of the winner. "Wow, she moves fast for her size," she breathed in shock.