

Extract from:

Assignata

Redemption in Blood

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Prologue

Polk stood in the half-lit tunnel, the sound of water running down the rock walls all around him. He paced back and forth in front of the line of cages built into the rock in front of him.

Heavy rasping breathing emanated out of the darkness of each of the twelve cells. The stench of wet fur and animal waste filled his nostrils. He smiled, a sense of pride spreading through his core.

It has been easy to flee Vordonia in the chaos that followed Balsh's death. But fleeing with stolen draughts had been risky. But Akalan had already been exiled, and

the northern imbecile had no idea how closely guarded the core liquids should be.

Gaining passage south had been a little trickier. But with Elliniko still without a Governor, he had managed to pay his way out of Kalavryta and south to the lands of the Bandar.

His intention was to sell the draughts to the highest bidder and let them wage war on Kalavryta while it was still reeling from the last Lanista's incompetence.

It wasn't until he had his first encounter with a beast as he travelled through Lagadia that the idea struck him. Akalan had never given any of his ideas any credence. Soon the day would come where he would wish he had treated him with a little more respect.

"Are these ones stable?" the voice from behind him made him jump. He turned to see Saravan clutching a fabric square to his nose, his face puckered at the uncomfortable smell.

Polk had sought out the grandest dwelling on his arrival in Bandar, he was lucky that inside was Saravan, a man of ambition and some wealth that relished the idea of plundering the lands of Kalavryta, if only they could overcome the might of the Assignata.

Polk wrinkled his nose, wondering if the smell was all as bad as the rich man was making out.

Saravan stood, staring at the cages, the water on the floor slowly seeping up the hem of his heavy red cloak. Polk lifted an eyebrow, no doubt under that cloak was clothing that cost more than he could imagine. Polk looked down at himself, still in his white tattered healers' robes. Now torn around the edges, grimy from the dirt of the work and no doubt smelling like the animal pit he worked in.

“They are nearly ready, Saravan, take a look for yourself.” And he gestured towards the cages.

Saravan leaned forward and squinted his eyes into the darkness but did not move his feet. He could hear breathing, but the blackness camouflaged all vision.

“You have to get closer, sir.” Polk sneered.

Saravan eyed Polk's diminutive figure next to him and took small steps towards the cage fronts. The torchlight glinted off something wet in the darkness. Saravan strained forwards, trying to make out if it was wet rock or eyes.

The movement in front of him was so fast he had little time to react. The paw that shot out from between the bars only missing him by inches as he fell onto his backside onto the wet rock.

Jumping up, he glared at Polk, but Polk was only interested in the form in the cage in front of him.

“Isn’t it magnificent?”

Saravan’s gaze moved back to the cage. Standing on the other side of the bars was a monster.

The beast was at least two feet taller than Saravan’s six feet and at least twice as wide. Standing on its hind legs, he could see its enormous muscular form even under the mountains of dishevelled black fur. Instead of dog-like paws, its arms finished in long fingers, each culminating in deadly claws.

Its head was colossal, a long muzzle lined with huge teeth, drool dripped from its snarling jawline as it breathed heavily, a growl coming from deep in its core with every breath.

Its black eyes looked back at Saravan, the man shuffled his feet, taking another step away from the cage.

“Isn’t it magnificent, sir?” Polk hadn’t taken his eyes off the beast in front of him. “I never dreamed that giving the draughts to beast would result in something quite so outstanding.”

“Can... can it be... controlled?”

Polk turned, walking to the end of the cages and rummaging in a chest. He returned with something draped in a grubby white sheet.

“Controlled is an interesting term, they can certainly be directed.” And with that he pulled the sheet away to reveal an Assignata breastplate.

The beast in front of them lunged at the bars, massive arms thrusting out into the corridor, snarling, and slashing for the armour. Its eleven counterparts joining in. Cage fronts rattling as claws tried to get to the breastplate, the sound of snarling and howling filling the tunnel.

Saravan staggered back against the far wall, covering his ears, his eyes wide.

“I have been wrapping their food in similar garments. If they can see this, they will attack nothing else.”

“When will they be ready to despatch?” gasped Saravan.

“Soon sir, I just want to ensure that we have enough in the pipeline should any be... dispatched.” Saravan nodded, his mouth still open, gawping at the beast that now paced up and down behind the cage bars in front of him.

“You’ll have anything you need...” he trailed off.

Polk dipped his head, looking out of the top of his eyes, a sneer behind his words. “Thank you, sir. For now, I think I just need some better, more comfortable

lodgings. And an increase in allowance. I need new robes to move respectfully around the town.”

“Yes, yes... whatever you need, my assistant will see to it,” Saravan replied, wafting his hand in Polk’s direction but still entirely focussed on the magnificent beast in front of him. “Not even the Assignata will be able to best these. It will be a massacre and Kalavryta will be open for the taking!”

He clapped Polk on the back so hard the small man staggered forward before he turned, laughing loudly as he left Polk in the tunnel with his army of monsters.