

REUNION

By Tigermark

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Leonidas sat quietly on the porch of the villa. It was near mid-winter, but the days weren't too cold at the moment. The town was quiet, as many had made the journey to Rome for the great drunken party there. The old wolf hadn't been back to Rome since he'd left all those years ago. His son now served as official caretaker of the villa, as its previous owner had signed it over to Leonidas that last time she'd been there, before her last trip to Rome. She'd only made him promise that she'd always have his hospitality when she was in the area, which he'd readily agreed to. It would pass on to his son, when he left this life, but for now he remained to watch the little ones play in the gardens, as he was doing now. His own grandchildren, and some of his great grandchildren, plus the descendants of Tacitus and Isetnofret, kept the place in a constant state of mild uproar. Even now he could see five of them running to and fro between the columns.

A paw touched lightly on his shoulder.

"Father, how are you doing today?"

Leonidas looked up into the face of a wolf in his middle forties. Middle aged by the standards of the day, Leonidas's son Kaeso looked like a young whelp next to his father. The older wolf was well known locally as the oldest fur in the area, passing his seventieth summer, and still able to get about for the most part under his own power.

“About usual. A bit stiff, and the usual pains.” Leonidas didn’t bother to recount the old wounds that pained him more each day. Nor did he tell his eldest about the creeping pains and numbness in his arms and chest. The old wolf knew he was nearing the end of his life, but didn’t want all the fuss and bother such an announcement would cause in the household.

Kaeso smiled, and made to go, but he felt his father’s paw on his arm.

“Kaeso, have some wine brought out, and stay a bit, if you would. I have some things to say, and I think you should hear them now.”

Kaeso again smiled, and replied in a teasing, chiding tone. “Father, what are you going to do, make confession like the Christians do? I’m no priest, and besides, I rather doubt you have done anything wrong of late. But I will sit and talk and have a cup with you. Things are so quiet with most everyone away.”

Kaeso walked into the villa before Leonidas could scold him. The old wolf might not follow the Christian’s God, especially with the current persecution by Emperor Domitian, but he didn’t abide making fun of them, either. Anytime anyone said anything untoward about them, a face he would never forget sprang into his mind’s eye. Even today, so many years later, that face caused him to shudder in memory of where he’d seen it.

Presently, the younger wolf returned, followed by the young serving femme who’d joined their household the summer before. The equine was barely fifteen years old, but Leonidas has insisted that they buy her and make her a free fur. Having no relatives left alive, and no way home, the filly had chosen to stay and work as a paid servant.

“Thank you E—, ah, Danapinna,” Leonidas said as she turned to go. She smiled and nodded before disappearing back into the house. Kaeso sat down next to his father.

“Your plan for her turned out to be a really good idea, Father. She’s very diligent in her duties, and more trustworthy than I would think one so young would be.”

Leonidas looked at his son as he sipped the wine. “Of course. She’s working for her own future, not because she’s being forced. Never forget, Kaeso, a fur will work three times as hard, and do nearly impossible things, when it’s voluntary. They work for themselves then.”

“As you’ve said many times. So Father, what is it you want to talk about?”

Leonidas sat quietly and sipped his wine in silence a few minutes. When he spoke again, his son could detect a great weariness in his voice. “There are things I wish to tell you, before my time runs out. Some, you might already know, or have guessed at. Others, well, I’m going to speak of things that I have told no other, save your mother. If I ramble a bit, well, allow an old wolf to tell his story.”

Kaeso sat back. The few times when his father opened up and told of his life were always worth hearing. Besides, the old wolf might not say it, but Kaeso wasn’t blind. He could see the pain in his father’s face more often now and he secretly felt that Leonidas would be gone before the next summer, if not sooner.

“Tell away, Father. The day is pleasant, the younglings are at play, and I can think of no better way to spend my time.”

Of course, running a villa like the one they sat in front of took time and effort, and there were a multitude of things Kaeso should probably be attending to at that moment, but he would not miss time with his father for nearly anything. The elder wolf’s eyes took on a far-away look as he delved into memories from long ago.

“You’ve seen my scars. Even asked about them a few times. Any ideas about them?”

“Uh, well. We, that is, my brothers and sisters, speculated among ourselves that you were in the Legions, and got wounded in a great battle.”

Leonidas chuckled ruefully. “Yes, a great battle, but not as a Legionnaire. I was truly Leonidas at Thermopylae, but in the Circus Maximus in Rome.”

Kaeso’s jaw dropped. “You mean you were a, a gladiator?”

“Yes. I was. One of the Damnatii, not an Auctoritas. I was falsely accused of murder, and taken to Carcer. A politician with schemes of his own took me out of there and sent me to the Ludus in Capua. There, to my surprise and eventual benefit, I met not only good fighters, but good friends. Of those, very few survived. Yes, I can see by your face your question. I ran away. If anyone wanted to press the matter, I’m a runaway slave with a death sentence on him. But hear me out. I didn’t run from battle, nor out of cowardice. I ran, because to stay would only have meant a meaningless death from the schemes of a mad emperor. You see, I was there in the time of Caligula. Not in his early years, when he was the hope and joy of Rome, but near the end, when he was absolutely insane. In fact, he died shortly after I arrived here.”

Kaeso sat, open mouthed. The story his father told was unbelievable. Nobody escaped Roman rule, or Roman justice. The very wolf who sat telling him this tale had said so himself, many times.

“But Father, this isn’t possible. You’ve always been Leonidas, keeper and owner of a fine villa, and good vineyards. Friend of the Virginias family, out on the Po plains, the family of a great Roman Patrician.”

Leonidas shook his head slowly. For a moment, his old wounds seemed to scream at him. He shook that off as best he could, and continued.

“All true, but there’s more to tell. You see, I’m not just friends with the Virginius family. My name originally, which I haven’t used since those terrible, glorious days, was Quintus. I am the fifth son of Caius Virginius, Patrician and Senator of Rome. Marcus Virginius, and Kaeso Virginius, who you know, are my brothers.”

Kaeso’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Father, how much wine did you have before I came out here?”

Leonidas chuckled, which ended in a slight wheeze. “I’m not drunk, thank you, and I’ll remind you to respect your father. It was a lifetime ago. For obvious reasons, no one knew this. Well, your mother did, eventually. After you were born, we couldn’t keep Father away. Unfortunately, he barely lasted five years after Marcus took over his seat in the Senate. He passed away when you were about one, I think. As you know, Marcus only passed away last year. Quite an amazing thing, with all the intrigue and the number of emperors Rome has had since I left. Why does it seem so many of them either don’t have any sense, die soon after taking office, or go insane and run the empire even farther down?”

“I’m . . . not sure, Father. I’ve never been anywhere near an emperor. I’ve only been to Rome twice. But how did a runaway gladiator end up as caretaker, and then owner, of a villa like this?”

Leonidas smiled. “The Lady Agrippina, niece of Claudius, sister of Caligula, and mother of Nero, owned this place. She saw me fight in my first fight as a gladiator. She was . . . well disposed toward me, and not very well disposed toward Caligula. When I showed up, barely on the mend after my last appearance in the Circus Maximus, she took me on as overseer. Not a hard job, as all the staff I had to oversee at first was a wonderful couple of newly freed ex-slaves, along with a small staff of newer slaves. You remember Tacitus and Isetnofret, of course. We all worked well together, and when word came that Caligula was going to be killed, the Lady rushed away to Rome. I had just arrived and she basically threw me the keys on her way out. Tacitus and Isetnofret were a bit uneasy, fearing I would

throw them out in favor of more slaves, but it didn't take long for us to start getting on well. She returned a few times, sometimes with her son, sometimes not. I always made sure she got the best of the wine from each year's vintage. It wasn't very many years along until the intrigues of Rome caught up to her, too. Rumor has it she, ah, accidentally put the wrong kind of mushrooms on Claudius's plate. This after marrying him. It never seemed right, marrying her own uncle, but not unheard of. She returned, that last time, a short time into the rule of her son Nero. She died before coming back again to visit. She'd given me the villa on that last visit, with a promise to return and sample my hospitality. Nero tried to make her death look like an accident at first, by trying to drown her in a boating accident. When that didn't work, they simply butchered her."

Kaeso took in the story, tallying it with what he knew had happened during his lifetime. It all jibed so far, but the fact that his father had been a gladiator seemed so incredible. The fur had been almost overly kind and gentle. Only once, when someone had insulted his mother, had his father shown any inclination toward temper or violence. Leonidas had moved as though to draw a sword, but his arm had never worked properly, and instead, after only a brief instant, the offending fur had found himself pinned against a wall, his feet several inches off the ground, his tunic front in the grasp of Leonidas's strong left paw. The fur apologized profusely, and after a moment something other than anger went through the wolf's eyes. Kaeso remembered vividly the look of pain and loss he'd seen in them as his father lowered the other fur to the ground and let him go.

"The Lady Agrippina was a good friend to you, then?" Kaeso asked in order to keep his father talking. During the younger wolf's brief introspection, Leonidas has gone silent, staring into his wine cup. He roused from his reverie, took a breath, and continued.

"She was a product of Rome. She could be terribly kind, or cruel, without thinking of herself as cruel. She was a part of Rome, and Rome was part of her. Being of the family of the emperors, I don't

think she could be any other way. She did me a great kindness, and for that I thank her, but I don't doubt that, had she herself been able to take the throne, she would have eventually gone down the same path as so many others. Still, we named your sister, our second daughter, after her."

Keaso nodded. "So then Father, tell me the whole story, if you can. You were a gladiator, and you were grievously wounded in a fight, and then—."

"Oh, not just any fight. Caligula, and another gladiator and the Lanista had more than just a mere fight in mind for me. Shortly before then I had bested the best gladiator of my Ludus. He was an Iberian wolf named Manius, and it had lost Caligula a bet. The Lanista set it up for me to play a famous part in the re-creation of a famous battle. The Battle of Thermopylae. I played Leonidas, King of Sparta, and managed to turn forty individual gladiators into forty Spartans, and myself into that famous king. The battle was a terrible thing. We were, of course, highly outnumbered, but most of the ones on the opposing side were untrained noxii. It became such a slaughter, and we Spartans fought so well, that the mob eventually not only demanded it be stopped, but demanded freedom for the fighters on both sides."

Kaeso's eyes had gone large, as the story seemed more and more incredible. "Father, you can't be serious! Legends about such battles abound, but almost always the ones playing the Spartans all die, as the originals did. Besides, you said you were a runaway. If the mob demanded your freedom, how could that be?"

"Yes grandfather, how?"

Both wolves turned to see that one of the cubs playing in front of the villa had stopped near them, and had been quietly listening. Arista was the daughter of Hedeia, Leonidas and Musa's fourth daughter. She was giving every indication of settling in to listen. Kaeso made to shoo her away, but Leonidas put a paw on his arm.

“No, let her stay. Any of them can listen. If they can learn a lesson about how to treat others, then I’ll have told my story for a good reason, other than to just tell it. Mind, Granddaughter, I’ll abide no whispering or interruption.”

The young wolfess nodded solemnly and sat down on the porch to listen. A couple of the others were looking on. They would likely join Leonidas’s little audience, too.

“Now, as to why I was still enslaved after that. I was terribly wounded. That’s why my right arm doesn’t work right. Caligula was going to let the slaughter continue, but the crowd had turned in our favor. He relented and stopped the battle, but he wasn’t about to grant freedom to us all. He had vengeance planned for me. He granted freedom to one in ten of the survivors from both sides. It was decided by lottery, but there was no chance I’d be one of the ten. A good friend, Tertius, was one of those freed. He and my friend Enid helped me escape a few days later. She . . . died fighting Caligula’s Germanic tribal guards.”

Leonidas fell silent. Kaeso looked over at his father after a moment, and noted the old wolf’s eyes were wet with barely held tears. Leonidas suddenly sniffled, and in a voice thick with emotion, went on.

“Enid was an equine femme from Brittania. She called her tribe the Icenii. She had been captured in battle, and been sent to be a gladiator. She had already gotten her *Rudus*, her freedom, but someone she cared about deeply was still enslaved as a *Damnatio*, so she remained, training furs to fight, and to hate Rome as much as she did. Only in the end, she gave her life to save me, a Roman.”

Leonidas was silent a moment, and then went on in a clearer voice. “Her lover’s name was Vipsania. She died after fighting a group of feral lions in a *Ventio* where she won her *Rudus*. The *Lanista* had set her up to be killed, and she died right after the fight from her wounds. I think Enid was looking for a meaningful way to join her. She wouldn’t be dissuaded from stopping to fight, to slow down their

pursuit. She pressed me to run, to get away. I did, and I never saw her again. I found out later from Tertius that she died in that last fight after killing Manius, the other gladiator that I'd beaten in the arena. He was working for Caligula to track us, and I guess after she killed him there on the Via Sarapia, they couldn't pick up my trail. I got away, and I've worked ever since then to keep a promise I made to Enid."

"What promise, Father?" Kaeso asked after the wolf was silent for a few more moments.

Leonidas roused from his silence. Looking over his son, and the small group of younglings now gathered and quietly listening, he smiled.

"Why all of you, of course. Enid made me promise to live a long life, and have lots of children. I'd say I got that part right."

A chorus of giggles and laughs went through the group of children. Leonidas could see that the group had grown to at least seven. Mostly wolf cubs, but a few were of mixed-species, the descendants of Tacitus and Isetnofret, the two freed slaves who had been at the villa when he'd arrived. He looked at them briefly, his smile increasing, before he returned to his story. When he did, his face turned solemn again.

"Treat your friends well, and all you meet well, my children. I am here today because furs who didn't know me at all, still stopped to help when they saw someone in trouble. I am here today because friends died, or risked death, to help me."

Nods went through the group as the children reflected his somber look. It nearly made Leonidas laugh. Ones so young had no idea what they were really nodding to, but perhaps the seed was planted for their actions later. Kaeso took a sip of his wine and nodded to his father.

"What happened after you escaped?"

“I made my way to the family vineyards, and there I stayed more or less in hiding while my wounds healed. Tertius bought a bit of land from the family, and settled down. Last I heard, he had lived well and had a nice family to pass it on to. Kaeso, who you are named after, had started out in the Legions with my brother Marcus, but Father adopted him, and he married a friend of our family, whom I had known since childhood. They had several ‘welines,’ as Kaeso called them, and live there still with their family. I eventually came here, and have lived here ever since. In all that time, I have kept the memory of those who died with and for me, and done my best to honor them by keeping my promise to them. My wife, Musa, I met in Massillia. She was a beautiful wolfess, just come to the city by ship. I wasn’t certain, with all I’d seen, if I could still love, but when I met her, I knew. She was intelligent, and competent, and most of all, she walked right up to me and introduced herself. We married about a year after I came here, and began to settle in and have a family. Keaso, you were first born, and then your brother Lucius. Then came Aristarete, our first daughter, and then Tertius, who I named not only for his birth order, but also to honor my friend. Then came Agrippina, named after the Lady herself, and then Quadratus, who joined the Legions, and was lost at Pompeii.”

Here Leonidas took a breath, and looked down at his paws for a long moment. That loss had hurt everyone in the villa. Word had come, from survivors who’d made it to ships and escaped being buried by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, that he had last been seen on the beach, directing furs toward safety. Leonidas was proud of his son for that, but the loss was still painful. After a moment, he shook his head to clear it, and went on.

“Quintus had come next, followed closely by Nitocris and then Hedeia. That was as far as we were able to go, Musa and I. She was such a strong femme, and I couldn’t have asked for a better mate or mother for our children, but when Hedeia was only two, Musa came back from a trip to Massillia not feeling well. Then word came of the outbreak of the red fever in the town. Musa was sick with it for

several days, before the fever . . . took her away. No physician could come out from town to treat her, as it was all they could do to keep it contained there. Musa and two of our slaves died from it here. You remember that all to well, Kaeso.”

Kaeso nodded, remembering the grief he'd felt at his mother passing. “Yes Father, I do. I also remember it was a long time after that before you acted anything like yourself again. I think I know what you were muttering to yourself all that time. I kept hearing words like ‘Enid’ or ‘Vips’, and I thought I heard you say ‘Dienekes’ a couple of times, as well. I know the legend of Thermopylae well enough to guess who you referring to now. We were all afraid you'd come down with the fever and would leave us, too.”

Leonidas sighed, and then wheezed and coughed a bit. Once he was back under control he smiled ruefully. “No, the gods didn't have that in store for me. They have this annoying habit of keeping me here when everyone else goes on. In any case, I came out of it, and carried on. The rest, you mostly know. Time passed, Emperor after emperor came and went in Rome. Nero, after having his own mother killed, went on to nearly destroy the city in a great fire. Then there was the year of Three Emperors. Then came Vespasian, who at least stopped the decline of the empire for a bit. Then came Titus, who conquered Judea and did good things for those who survived Mt. Vesuvius as well as the second fire that tried to eliminate the blight of Rome from the face of the earth. Now Emperor Domitian is on the throne. He's managed to run the empire into the ground; to the point the coins he has minted are nearly worthless. The only thing he seems to do well is hunt down peaceful Christian furs to slaughter them.”

“Father! It isn't wise to speak in such a way, especially in front of the younglings.” Kaeso looked around as though expecting to see an eavesdropper slinking off to report his father's words to the emperor. Leonidas simply laughed a bit, before it trailed off into a cough.

“Son, don’t fret. I doubt if any of Domitian’s spies would call us Christians. In any case, I’m done. That’s my story. Now all you youngsters go play. Shoo, go keep yourselves warm by chasing each other around, like always, eh!”

The children nodded as one, and one smacked another on the arm and called, “You’re it!” With that the group jumped up and ran out through the gardens, their laughter filtering back and putting a smile on Leonidas’s face. The smile faded as he felt something odd happening inside himself. Something seemed to suddenly let go, and he felt the creeping numbness increase. Somewhere far away, he thought he heard a voice calling his name. He picked up the walking stick he used and made to stand.

“Kaeso, give me a paw. I want to stand up. I feel my end is here, and I will not meet it sitting down.”

“Father! No! Let me go get the physician. You’ll be fine in a bit.” Kaeso was alarmed at the faraway sound in his father’s voice, and the sudden ashen pall on his face. The younger wolf was about to call out, or run for help, when his father gripped his arm with a strong left paw.

“No Son, no need. It’d just drag out the inevitable. Help me stand, and then when the time comes, put me with your mother. And, **cough** when you go to Rome next, stop by a cemetery near the Temple of Venus that has mostly feline priestesses. Look for a statue of an equine holding onto a vixen, with a hoplon shield against their legs. Go there, and tell Enid I kept my promise.”

Kaeso had managed to help the old wolf to his feet. He could see in his father’s face that it was his time. As Leonidas leaned on his son and his stick, he realized he probably looked a lot like his father had, near the end. The numbness was spreading rapidly, but now there was pain, too. His lungs felt like they were on fire, and his old wounds screamed their agony into his brain. He turned to look at his son.

“Remember Son. Amat Victoria Curam. No Victory without Pain. May your victories be great, and your pain less so—*”

Leonidas felt his vision beginning to close in. He closed his eyes, and felt his body failing. He couldn't move. The numbness was in all his extremities, and where it wasn't numb, pain screamed out. There was that voice again, much closer, calling his name. It sounded so familiar. Then suddenly the pain was gone. He felt a soft, gentle paw on one shoulder, a rough, strong one on the other. It should have hurt, that shoulder. It was where his wound was, but he felt no pain. Then he felt arms around him, and lips pressing his. He opened his eyes, and found himself looking into the beautiful eyes of his mate. He returned the kiss enthusiastically. The forms to either side of him were familiar, too. He looked from one to the other, uncertain what would happen next.

He turned to the equine. “Enid, I kept my promise. Your sacrifice was not in vain.”

The equine simply smiled at him, and with a toss of her mane, indicated the way to go. As the group set out, she looked back at him and smiled again.

“Welcome home, Quintus.”

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Kaeso gently lowered the slumped form of his father to the porch floor. The old wolf's face had a more serene look on it than he'd ever seen. He reached down and closed the lifeless eyes. He'd call for the servants to come prepare the body in a moment, but for now he just sat down beside it. After a moment he whispered something low, and tears began to fill his eyes.

“Ave, Gladiator.”

The End