

Gladiator

The stadium roar had filled Shek's ears for so long that he no longer thought about it. The voices that contributed to the din were, like most crowds on Torei, composed almost entirely of women. High class women in gleaming wet-look couture, working girls in glossy uniforms, gaggles of slaves kneeling about their Masters or Mistresses, and the desperate hungry girls in cheap laminations begging fortune to smile on their chosen champion.

The Client nudged Shek's side with an elbow, gesturing up to a particularly desperate woman who squirmed against the punishments her locked-on armour seemed to deal out. The Client's words barely broke the barrier of crowd noise, giving Shek an appreciation of the combined female screaming reminiscent of an itch reminding you of the presence of a shirt by being difficult to scratch.

Shek admired the panicked figure up in the cheap seats, then turned his attention back to the fight. The two gladiators were still dancing around one another, forming impromptu loops and bights with the ropes in their hands. The roar of voices surged each time they lunged together, catching each other in Oshazi quick-binds before twisting out again.

"This part is always just the appetiser!" The Client's voice scratched dully at Shek's ear. "No one ever wins with the martial rope stuff at this level."

As if to illustrate The Client's point, one woman got the other in a modified Spiral Hug weave. Her opponent squirmed helplessly for a few seconds to the audible delight of the audience, but suddenly kicked a knee up to her own chest and twirled through it. Fibres of combat-grade rope sprayed outward as the sharp surfaces on her costume tore through. In moments she had her opponent in a similar position, with nearly identical results.

"If we're lucky," The Client howled mutely, "they'll send in the animals!"

Shek waited for the arena to shift, quietly hoping for a steelshow instead. He'd seen recordings of one of the gladiators in a match where she'd sheared her own hair to escape the grip of a thrown snap-cuff. She was famous for chaining herself to her opponent, which worked in her favour more often than not.

The women in the arena circled like dogs, lunging occasionally into obscene holds and twisting out of them again. It seemed for a while that the game would remain an ordinary wrestling match, but then the Isolates walked through.

The crowd hushed immediately upon their appearance, and the gladiators caught what sideways glances they dared. Large rubbery devices were dragged into the field, and seemed to be *planted* in the ground, more than anything. Tubes and bulges of black viscous sap swelled from the floor and set in the shapes of unknown devices.

The lesser of the two gladiators dove behind a glistening black bush and grabbed a gun-shaped fruit from one of its branches. Holding it out in front of her, she dropped to one knee and squeezed the trigger. Her opponent dropped prone and rolled sideways, but needn't have bothered.

The gun device melted into twin spheres of black rubber, like ball mittens around her fists. No projectile was fired, and she rubbed them together frantically as her opponent rose and charged. She fell to the ground, arms outstretched in a desperate attempt to launch the other gladiator in a throw.

Once the ball mittens hit the other woman's chest, they slithered under her costume like oil dribbling down glass. She clawed at her breasts and belly furiously, her hips bucking at what was happening between her legs.

With her hands now free, the first woman dashed straight for a large device suspended from a framework of glossy vines. It was shaped like