

Angel of Death
By Kathryn Downs

"The arena gates will open soon. Have you chosen your weapon?"

The guard's voice pulled me out of a fuzzy dreamland. Lush grasses were exchanged for sand grinding into every pore of my body, a mountain breeze for suffocating heat, chirping birds for tormented screams, buttery sunshine for flickering torchlight. I glanced at the wall of pathetic weapons glimmering dully in the uncertain light. I blinked slowly. I tilted my head, a smile dancing on my cracked lips.

"My depression."

"A bold choice."

His voice was mocking, eyes dancing with ill concealed laughter. What my lack of choice implied, going into the arena unarmed, was unheard of. Even though I had no chance, I was still expected to choose a weapon. And yet he did not care. To him, it was all a joke. What happened in that hell hole was none of his concern. After the shackles were off and the gate was open, I would be dead.

The despicable scrape of stone against stone filled the air. Blinding light poured into the antichamber where I'd been held, instantly blinding me. I was caught by surprise as the guard dragged me from my corner of the cell, leaning down to unlock the chains. His hands lingered on my wrists, his lips at my ear.

"The arena awaits."

I snarled as he threw me into the sand. I landed with a wet thunk. Sand stuck to my face and my hands, wet with blood that wasn't mine. I propped myself up, blinking rapidly at the scene that unfolded before me.

"Get up," hissed the guard, before the boom of the gate echoed through the arena.

Walls too high to climb, stadium style seats packed to the brim and overflowing. It was open air, the sun beating mercilessly down on the now scorching sand. The reek of rotting flesh and the otherworldly scent of faerie blood stuffed itself down my nose as I peeled myself off the ground.

The gladiator faced me from across the pit. He was massive, wearing studded armour and carrying a broadsword that could cleave stone, still glistening with fresh blood. His shield was an ugly mess of scratches and dents, gleaming metal woven together to create a sort of lion's head with its maw gaping open. The warrior had a head to match, and forearms covered in fur, ending in claws that could disembowel me in one swipe. His legs were bent backwards, a tail swishing

around massive red tinged paws. He was a hybrid. A rare commodity indeed. No wonder the sand under me was already soaked with blood.

I took one step, then a few more, swaying on my feet before I stopped. The deep cowl of my cloak hid my face from view as I lowered my head. I watched him, watched the crowd as it contemplated us, watched the soldiers that stood on the lip of the pale wall. I laughed to myself. It was a soft, dead sound, even to my own ears. I tilted my head, and the gladiator prowled towards me.

I stood perfectly still, biding my time, plunging into the pit inside me. Darkness writhed, whispering in my ear, skating over my fingertips. My depression was a living creature. A beast of shadow and claws, it ripped me apart and sewed me back together, just to rip me apart again for the sheer joy of it. That monster coiled around my heart, shadows pulsing through my veins. I sank into the hell that had developed inside me, the despair that thrived within.

I flexed my hands, breathing steadily, forfeiting myself to the monster in my head. The gladiator slowed, circling me. A predator assessing its prey. I did not turn to keep him in my sight. I did not need to. The thing inside me told me exactly where he was. My head was bowed, my eyes closed. I swayed again, threatening to collapse. I was weak, in their eyes. I was weak in everyone's eyes. Every single one of those bloodthirsty lowlifes underestimated me. And so did the silly little warrior.

He laughed at me, gesturing with his sword. "This is what they send me? A little girl who can't even stand up? Pathetic."

The crowd roared in response. He moved in a circle, hiding the fact he was searching for the Emperor, to get his nod of approval. This was all for them. To entertain the royals. To watch their people suffer. And yet, some volunteered. People vied for the honour to battle in the pits. There was no doubt that some envied me my chance. This thing, this arena... it was just a game to them. A demented game. And I was just another mangled piece.

"You'll beg, little girl," the warrior laughed. He circled closer. "I will make you beg for mercy by the time I am done with you."

I lifted my head, turning my gaze to the warrior as he approached from the side. When I locked eyes with him, the beast inside me snarled, using my mouth without my permission. His stride faltered. That's when he realized there was something off about me.

"You are the one who should pray for my mercy. You are the one who will beg." My mouth moved once again without my permission. The voice that came out was not mine, nor did it belong in my world. The gears of time grinding together. That's what the voice sounded like.

"Are you scared, little girl?" The warrior's taunts echoed through the arena. His voice quavered on the last word, almost imperceptible with the thundering crowd. "Are you scared to die?"

"There are worse things than death." It was my voice that came out as a soft whisper. My voice that echoed through the arena as if I had shouted the words. My voice that was smooth as silk.

That's when the fear seeped into his eyes. His face drained of color and he stopped dead in his tracks.

I held up my hands. My tattered sleeves fell away, moon white wrists shimmering in the dry heat. The audience went silent, a sick curiosity bubbling in their twisted minds. I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. It clouded in front of me as the temperature dropped to become unbearably frigid.

The beast inside me screamed with my mouth, throwing my head back to howl its challenge to the world. Darkness encompassed my entire being. It shot out, coils of starless sky, kicking up sand in cataclysmic winds. Those claws speared for the gladiator's body, crashing into him as he swiped wildly in an attempt to fight them off. I grinned as he swung his puny little sword at the product of my broken mind. He was no match for my despair. He was nothing but a toy in my games.

The little warrior slowed down, his frantic stabs and swipes turning into occasional parries, until he could do nothing but moan and whimper. Until he was swaying on his feet. Until he collapsed. Tendrils caressed him softly, each one the frozen sea within me. My movements were liquid as the beast inside me moved my body towards the gladiator lying prostrate on the ground.

The sands shifted, parting as thousands of snakes writhed into existence. Each one hissed, slithering through his body, picking him apart bit by bit. He screamed himself hoarse, clawing at his face, his arms, his chest, at the shadows as insubstantial as a summer breeze. Each person sees something different. Each mind has its own hell. People tell each other that darkness is peace. Silence. Warmth. They lied. It is agony, desperate wails, and frozen terrors. Indeed, my hands were frosty as I wrapped my fingers around his throat and squeezed. The wind halted. The sand hung suspended midair. Everyone saw his body ice over in my hands. They all watched as he exploded, blood and gore coating every inch of me.

My hands dropped, the darkness retreating back into me, spiraling towards my chest. Dust floated lazily towards the ground. Silence. I threw off my hood, looking around at the stunned faces. And that's when I noticed it. Everything was stained. The entire world was sparkling midnight. The sand, the walls, the benches. Even the clothes had been leached of any color. The world was made of shadow. My shadow.

They took me away, still doused in his blood. They interrogated me, tortured me, demanded answers. How? How had I been infested, blessed, cursed, with the shadows? Why did my blood run blacker than the darkest night, why did my voice drive those who heard it to psychosis, why

was my skin as cold as glacial ice, why did my eyes flash with a power more ancient than the dirt we walked on? Why did it disappear as quickly as it lashed out? Why me?

It did not take them long to realize that their forms of torture did not affect me. I had endured the unthinkable. They could not come close to the pain I'd felt, to the fear instilled in me by my own demons. So they changed tactics. Instead of understanding me, they turned me into a weapon. They honed me into a blade that could rip apart worlds. They clothed me in darkness and mystery, sent me into the arena as an angel of Death. I stalk through the blackened sands, immersed in the blood of my enemies. I fight every one of the creatures damned to a death in the blood soaked arena. The prisoners and the beasts from hell and the warriors stupid enough to try their hand. I annihilate them all.

I am shadow. I am darkness. I am pain. I am the storm that wakes you in the dead of night only to plunge you into the horrors of your own mind. I am the nightmares that haunt you, the memories you will never be able to bury. I am the madness you try to ignore. I am the screams that rip from your shredded lips, the crunch of your bones in my iron fingers, the scrape of a dagger against shattered fragments of time. I am the hand of Death, and you are a fool to not be afraid.