

READING SAMPLE

T'nari Blood Claim

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The shrieking sounds from the arena echoed down the dank tunnel. Azhiedal T'mirurok sat with his back to the cold, stone wall of his filthy cell, staring at the iron bars in front of him. The peculiar, acrid smell of reptilian skin permeated the air, mixed with the cloying odors of blood, feces, and urine. It took all his years of strict discipline to keep his body under control and maintain his outward composure. Personal pride was all he had left.

Azhiedal closed his eyes and blew out a silent breath. Even in this dark, stinking hole, he could still see the searing flash of explosions as he watched his fleet crumble under the onslaught of invading Drahkian warships. For eight long months he had led the combined fleet of the Denáran system against the superior forces of the Drahkian Empire, a curse which was spreading outward from the Draco Expanse like a nightmarish plague.

He still didn't understand why the reptiles had set their sights on Denár. Aydin and the other three inhabited planets of the solitary star system in the outer reaches of the Capellan Belt were not particularly wealthy and carried a long history of spiritual introspection and mystical training that stretched back countless millennia to the original progenitors.

The admiral's mouth twisted in disgust. Conquest for the sake of conquest—there was simply nothing else he could conclude. The sadistic reptilian hordes fed off of the terror of other races. They were vicious, blind, and thick, with no values, conscience, or any shred of empathy. There was no reasoning with them—he had tried, but had hit a stone wall of arrogance and contempt from Dura, the commander of the warband that had assaulted Denár.

A blood curdling scream tore down the tunnel, jarring Azhiedal's thoughts with yet another chilling reminder that he had been brought here to die. After forcing Denáran capitulation over Aydin three days prior, Dura had sent the admiral as a war prize to Overlord Bálok on Bahár in the Perseun Cluster where the vanquished leader had been

unceremoniously ushered into the bowels of the capital city's great Colosseum to await his fate.

Azhiedal's head rocked back against the wall as a wave of despair washed over him. He was here in this black pit, waiting for a brutal death, while Dura's soldiers and ravenous saurs swarmed over the conquered Denáran worlds. He never dreamed he would leave this life alone and defeated on some far-off, alien world as nothing more than a momentary spectacle for bloodthirsty beasts who called themselves men. *Ah, Yalina, my love, I should be with you!*

A roaring swell of voices reverberated down the tunnel, followed by the rasping hoots of a victorious fighter. At the sound of approaching boots, Azhiedal cracked open his eyes just as three armed, crested, lizard-like reptilians in sleeveless, dark green garb stopped in front of his cell and peered down at him between the bars.

"This is the one," the Drahk at the front grated in Mothertongue.

The two guards behind him exchanged a few words in their harsh, guttural language, bringing a low laugh from the officer in charge. "He's an admiral from somewhere. On your feet," the man ordered with a loud kick to the iron door. "You're up next. Last fight of the day."

With a silent sigh, Azhiedal slowly pushed himself up from the floor and stood facing the taller reptilians with a blank look.

"He's big enough, for a human. Good muscle tone. But he'd better know how to fight or there'll be hell to pay."

"No shit." The officer's amber eyes narrowed in the dim light as he studied the brawny human with shoulder-length, white-blond hair. "For some reason, you've been selected to face Overlord Bálók himself." When Azhiedal's countenance remained stony, the man sneered and raised his voice. "It's a great privilege, human. Do you understand what this means?"

"What do you want me to say," the admiral responded flatly, "that I'm impressed?"

The Drahk lunged at the iron door with a loud snarl and grabbed the bars in anger. "Lord Bálók is the best fighter in the Empire! It's our duty to provide him with a worthy opponent or at least a satisfying kill, so you'd better look alive when you get out there, small man! The Emperor himself is here and will be watching your match."

With a disgusted huff, the officer let go of the bars and spoke to the guard on his left. “Go tell them he’ll be out in a few minutes. Kor, get the blades—the new ones made for Lord Bálok’s fight.”

“Yes, Captain Perón.”

As the guards hurried off to do his bidding, the Drahk turned away and placed his hands on his hips, addressing Azhiedal without looking at him. “Strip down and make yourself ready.”

The admiral slipped out of his jacket and folded it reverently, carefully setting it down on the floor beside him. Unbuttoning his shirt, he methodically divested himself of his remaining garments, using the familiar ritual to clear his mind and let go of his rank, his identity, the last vestiges of regret for not being able to save Denár from a horrific future.

As he laid his shoes on top of the neat pile of clothing, Azhiedal’s glance fell to the faint sigils on the backs of his hands. Touching a fingertip to the light tracery of tattoos from his long years under Master Zhenchin’s tutelage, he skimmed over the delicate lines covering his forearm, sending a soft tingling into the near-invisible network running all over his body.

Little use here, he thought bleakly. He’d simply be shot, or worse, if he dared to use his abilities to bring down a Drahkian opponent, especially the lauded overlord, and it would only prolong the inevitable. At this point, his best option was to marshal enough of his early sparring skills to force the reptile into killing him swiftly.

Azhiedal dropped his hands and rose as the captain turned a key in the heavy lock and swung the bars open. The amber eyes burned into him through narrowed lids, the Drahk’s disgust and ire radiating palpably as Azhiedal stepped forward into the poorly lit stone tunnel.

“The floor is clear. Send him out!” came a shout from the direction of the arena just as the second guard returned carrying two shiny daggers which he held out toward Azhiedal.

“You’ll need these,” he scoffed with what could have passed for a smirk across his rough features.

The admiral took the blades, shifting one into each hand and tested them for weight. The weapons were surprisingly graceful and well balanced, the razor-sharp edges tapering into elegantly curved tips.

Captain Perón shoved past him without a glance and started down the hall toward the noise of the arena. “Let’s go.”

With the guard falling in behind him, Azhiedal held the blades loosely as he walked past the rows of empty cells. He had yet to see any of the captives return from their treks into the arena and could only assume that their mangled carcasses were hauled off and disposed of elsewhere.

The chaotic rumble of voices rose in pitch as Perón appeared at the tunnel entrance and stepped to the side, motioning the Denáran forward into the bright sunlight. For several heartbeats, Azhiedal’s vision wavered under the onslaught of too much light, but he managed to keep the momentary discomfort from showing as he blindly walked past the Drahk and felt the cool stone beneath his feet give way to hot, packed dirt.

“He’s going to spread you all over that field,” the captain sneered in a low voice before it was drowned out by a sudden swell of cacophonous chatter.

Azhiedal blinked several times to clear his sight and a jolt ran through his flesh the moment he lifted his gaze into the heights of the enormous Colosseum. Tens of thousands of cold reptilian eyes bore down on him while the thunder of venomous jeering slammed into his senses like a runaway avalanche.

Taking firm hold of his will, the admiral quashed the flash of panic that gripped his solar plexus, quickly dispelling the fear before it could take hold. *I will not feed them*, he iterated several times as he walked slowly across the floor, using every step to pull himself inward to a place of calm, detached focus. He came to a halt at the center of one end of the huge oval floor and let out a slow breath, releasing the last vestiges of tension in his limbs and grounding his energy into the solid earth beneath his feet. He was ready. He could carry out what he needed to do and be at peace within himself, grateful, at the very least, that Yalina wasn’t here to watch him die.

Abruptly shifting their attention away from the lone human below, the crowds began to howl, shouting in hungry anticipation of their lord’s appearance out of the wide tunnel at the far end of the floor. Azhiedal watched the entrance dispassionately until a sleek figure emerged from the darkened depths and ambled out into the sunlight.