



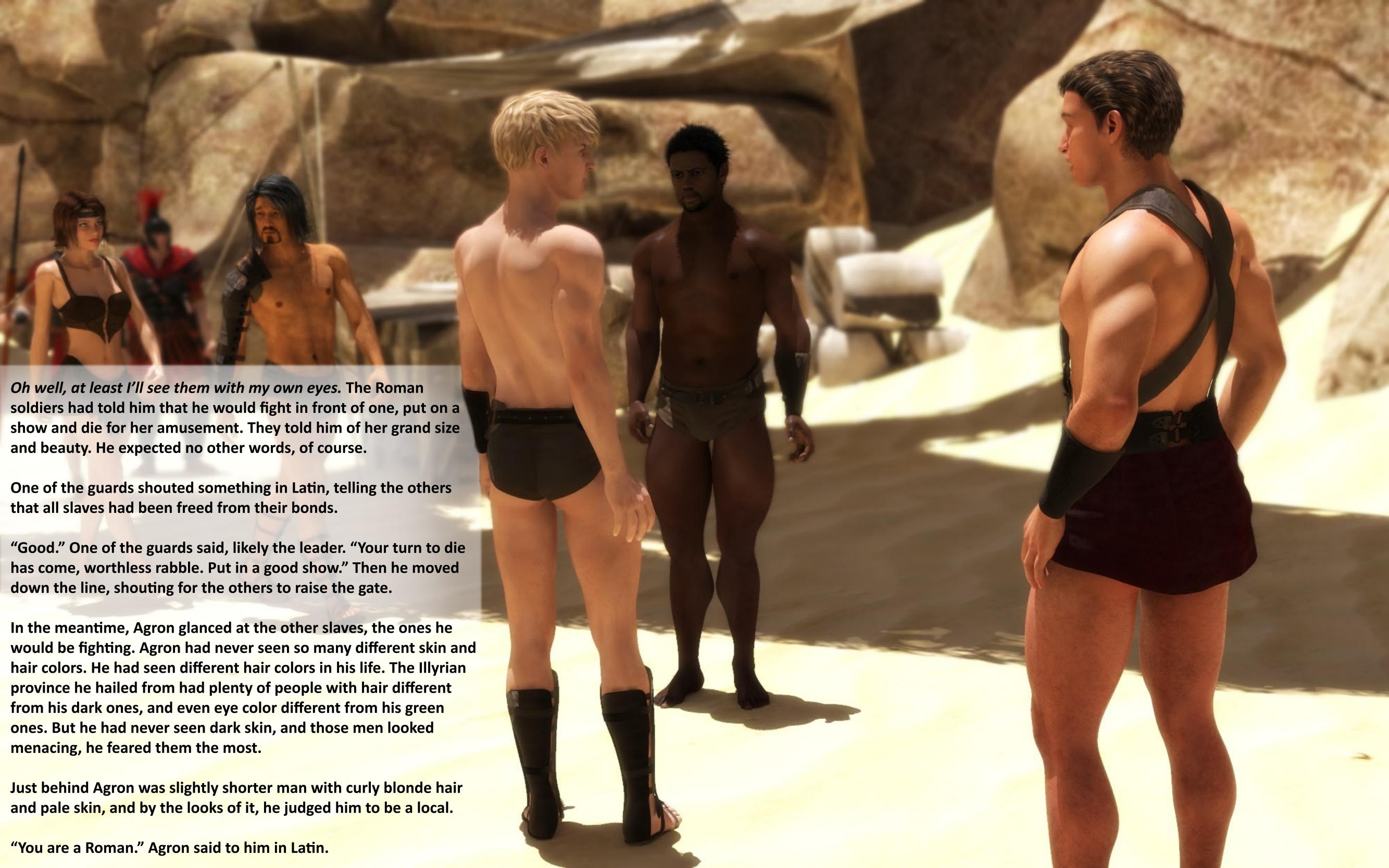


A Roman guard approached him and crudely removed Agron's shackles which held his arms and legs bound close together. He felt relieved. He hated the feeling of metal against his skin for so long. Though he was surprised that it was the first thought that came to mind rather than the small freedom that was allowed him. Perhaps it was because he knew he would die today.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath, enjoying the calm before the storm. All he ever wanted was to live the quiet life that he'd been born into. A simple fisherman, roaming the seas of the Adriatic, living in the wind and the freedom of the waves. But then the Romans came to his fishing village in the Dalmatian coast, and with the pretext of piracy, enslaved him and all the other able-bodied men in it, leaving Agron's wife alone with all the others to fend for themselves.

You will serve the wills of the goddesses, his captors had told him.

Of course, he'd heard about them. Having been under Roman rule for centuries, his people knew Latin well enough and had often spoken to passing traders that had told the tales of the Roman goddesses. Agron did not understand how mere women could rule the Empire of Rome, how they could trick its population into thinking they were divine, exaggerating their powers and abilities. Were there no men worthy of the imperial throne that could challenge these women?



The man glanced at Agron briefly, frowning eyes full of distrust, but said nothing and turned back looking at the ground again. Agron expected it anyway. All the men looked restless, mostly scared and defeated, nobody was in the mood to talk. But Agron wanted to, he needed to. Having allies before venturing out to kill each other seemed like a good idea.

"What didn't you do?" He said to the Roman again.

The man looked at him again, still frowning, but this time in confusion to Agron's wording. "Your Latin is broken, slave."

Agron chuckled. "That's rich. But I mean, surely they just made up whatever offence you were enslaved for, just like most of us here."

The Roman laughed. "Oh no, I'm guilty. I forgot to call my goddess by her proper title... and perhaps a bit more than that."

Agron sneered. "Why do you Romans bow down to women? How did they ever get to hold so much power in the empire?" The Roman turned once again, but this time he looked at Agron with an expression of utter bewilderment. "Are you mad?"

"Huh?" Agron was confused. "Why? They're women."

The Roman laughed, and laughed hard, so much that one of the guards came up to him and shoved the butt of his spear into his stomach, then spat on him. But he didn't mind, in fact, he was still smiling when he got up again. "You don't know, do you? You've never seen one of our goddesses?"

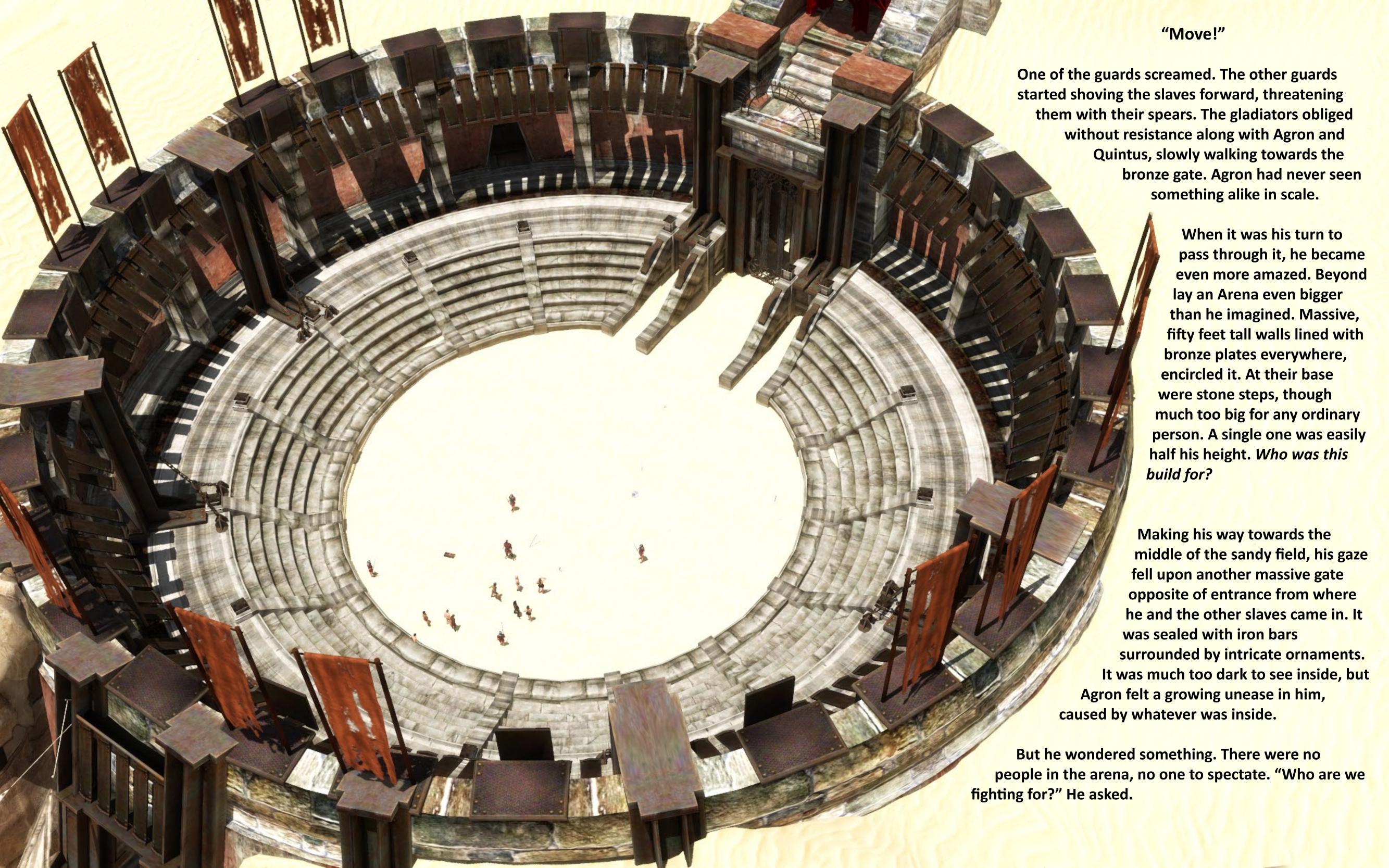
"What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't worry." He said. "I won't spoil the fun. We'll be fighting for the entertainment of one of them anyway, so you'll see for yourself." He reached out a hand towards Agron. "I'm Quintus."

Agron returned the favor and shook his hand. "Agron."

Quintus nodded, and both turned their heads just in time as the guards raised the gates to their full extent.









For about a minute, total silence reigned within the arena's field. The men looked around, eyes wandering from one to the other. They could always choose not to fight, Agron though, but the Romans put them here for a reason. Maybe it was some kind of a test? To see how people would react in such situations? Stories of Roman cruelty never ceased to amaze Agron back when he was a child.

But after the minute passed, one man, dark of skin, picked up a gladius stuck on the sand, the roman short sword. He swung and slashed it around in the air a few times, then looked around. That broke the ice, and everyone hurried to pick one of the different weapons lying around. Agron had no choice, so he looked around before he found a suitable weapon.

He took the spear in his hand, feeling its weight. He had used often used a spear while out fishing on the deep seas, it suited him. He had used it to try and wound some of the larger fish, herding them towards the nets for capture. The spear also reminded him of the time he had seen a great whale, the largest and most magnificent creature he had seen ever seen, incomparable to any other in size.

He was brought back from his thoughts by the sound of clashing metal. He spun, looking at the source of the sound. Two of them, the dark skinned one and the exotic woman, rushed at each other, swinging their short swords at each other with genuine attempt. Others looked at them, unsure what to do.

"Stop it!" Agron shouted. They paused for a moment, looking at Agron with frowning eyes.

"This is what they want!" He said. "We need to work together, try to find a way out of here!" He pointed at the open gate with his spear.

The men continued to look at Agron for a moment, then the dark skinned one said something unintelligible, as did the woman in another tongue. They obviously didn't know Latin.



"To what end?" One of the others said calmly. He was a large one, dark hair and very heavily built. "Where are we going to run to? We can't escape even if we get out of the arena. We're in the middle of nowhere." He raised his own sword and swung it in the air a couple of times. "At least here, we die like men."

"We don't have to!" Agron said. "If we-"

A sudden, inhumanly loud moan came from behind Agron, terrifying him. He spun around, looking at its source, the tent. The moan had washed over the group of men too, for everyone had ground to a stand still, entirely quiet.

"What was that?" Someone whispered.

Then, Quintus broke on his mad laugh again, and fell down on his knees. "Bow down, fools. Bow down to our goddess!"

Agron and the others looked at him, confused. Then they heard some movement from the tent. Its fabric rustled for a moment, and something appeared from in between the layers. Agron needed a moment before he could believe that he was seeing fingers, giant fingers that were easily as long as his legs. They grabbed the fabric and shifted it sideways, revealing a silhouette behind that frightened Agron to his core.

"I'm bored." The booming, female voice said from inside, sending shivers down Agron's spine. "Bring the first one in."

First one? What is going on?



