

RED SONJA



OUTMATCHED

By

Edgar Nightbird



CHAPTER 2

FIGHT

Sonja strode down the underground tunnel with confidence, her long legs carrying her with flowing grace. The cool dampness of the air clung to her bare skin, a welcome relief from the sweltering heat outside. Flickering torchlight cast dancing shadows against the rough-hewn walls, carved from the very bedrock beneath the arena stands.

The path sloped gently downward, winding deeper into the earth. From side passages she could hear the snarls of caged beasts and the raucous shouts of men. The pungent smells of animals, sweat, blood and fear permeated the stale air. This was a realm of violence and spectacle, where valor mingled with brutality for the entertainment of the masses above.

Sonja inhaled deeply, feeling her warrior spirit quicken within. It had been too long since she experienced the heady thrill of the arena. Here, her skills could be tested against worthy foes, rather than nameless brigands and highwaymen. Pit fighters and slaves battled for glory, fame, gold or simply survival. Even desperate commoners came seeking fortune, no matter the risk. All were drawn by the siren call of the arena—the chance to cheat death and etch one's name into legend before the roaring crowds.

These tunnels teemed with such hopefuls awaiting their moment in the harsh light above. Sonja passed hulking bare-chested men with scars crisscrossing their flesh, lean swordsmen honing their blades, even exotic beasts with tamers struggling to control them until their time came to unleash savagery upon the sands. All paused to watch the tall warrior pass, her gleaming armor, confident stride and stark beauty setting her apart. Long looks of appraisal followed in her wake, tinged with awe and wariness, but Sonja paid them no mind. Her focus was singular and unwavering.

At the end of the passage stood a guard at his post before a heavy gate of iron bars. Sonja presented her wooden token, and the guard reached to unlock the portal, allowing her entry to the small preparation room beyond. A dozen other fighters awaited within, pacing and limbering up as the ruckus from above filtered down to them. The contestants were as varied as any she had seen; burly, bare-chested men checking their weapons; a pair of wiry Khitans huddled together in one corner separate from the others; even a lithe dark-skinned woman limbering up cat-like in the shadows, reminding her of Deija. With a flick of her head, Sonja shook that thought out of her mind. She could not afford any distractions in this place, especially not of that kind.

All ceased their preparations to eye the new arrival. Sonja read their gazes in an instant—the men with lusty interest, the Khitans with suspicion, the woman with cold assessment. She met each stare with indifference, letting her imposing physique speak for itself as she found an open space along the side wall. Leaning back against the rough stone, she crossed her arms and waited with easy patience, letting the thrum of the crowds above set her pulse racing.

This backwater town was unworthy of her talents, but that mattered not. Once given the chance, she would gift these crowds a spectacle of martial prowess beyond any they had witnessed before. Straining her ears, she could just make out the announcer's booming voice whipping the audience into greater frenzy between preliminary bouts. Soon that voice would be calling out her name, and the foolish fighters around her would learn why she was legend. The corners of Sonja's lips curled in a hint of a smirk at the thought.

Her gaze fell upon the large gate made of thick timber and iron set into the adjacent wall. Its imposing form dominated the cramped preparation room, the long shadows cast by flickering torchlight only magnifying its intimidating visage. She noted how the other fighters gave it a wide berth, as if the mere proximity to that shut gate would invoke some dire fate. Her eyes traced up along its weathered planks and sturdy iron supports, all the way to the small grated window near the top.



Through the narrow slits she caught glimpses of the darkening sky and blazing arena torches beyond, along with the waving of the crowds seated in the upper rows. The muffled sounds of clashing steel, cries of pain and roars of bloodlust seeped through the opening, sending a spark racing through Sonja's veins. She inhaled deeply, picturing the moment those gates would slowly creak open before her to reveal the packed arena stands and her first opponent awaiting, the rapturous cheers ringing in her ears. A swell of excitement rose within her chest, her body coiled and ready to spring forth into glorious combat once more. But for now she waited, prepared to remind this arena—and all of Hyboria—why she was the greatest swordswoman of the age.



Deija settled into her seat, casting occasional glances at the well-dressed man beside her. His features remained obscured beneath the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat, though she could make out uneven patches of pale, gnarled flesh covering one side of his face. Old burn scars, she surmised, likely earned in some horrific accident or battle long ago. They gave his visage a sinister cast, especially paired with his brooding silence.

“Governor,” she greeted softly, but received no response other than a grim huff, making her wish she had kept quiet.

With a disgruntled mutter of her own, Deija turned her eyes to the arena below, where crowds filed into the roughly hewn stone benches, a steady buzz charging the torch-lit atmosphere. Vendors hawked refreshments up and down the aisles—skin bladders of cheap wine, skewers of charred mystery meat, baskets of fried dough. The smells of smoke, stale sweat, and cooking grease mingled with the underlying tang of old blood soaked into the sand.

Down on the arena floor, contestants warmed up the crowds with displays to prime their bloodlust. Archers lined up along one edge, loosing arrows in trick shots—piercing thrown fruits, splitting wooden poles, even igniting braziers with flaming tips. Muscled fighters paired off in wrestling matches, straining sinew against sinew to the raucous shouts of spectators

placing wagers. A few scantily clad dancers undulated along another edge, bare curves gleaming in the torchlight. It was all a thinly veiled prelude to the violence soon to come.

As the stands filled, the energy swelled to fever pitch. Crude cheers and curses rang out, feet stamped the stone in arrhythmic thunder. The air was choked with smoke, sweat, and the metallic bite of anticipation. When the sun finally sank below the crude wooden palisade rimming the pit above, horns sounded to announce the commencement of the tournament's main event. The crowd's roar doubled in force. Down in the cramped fighters' vault underneath, the gate rumbled open in agonizing slowness, eliciting a fresh wave of shouts and stamping feet from above.

Beside her, the scarred man's leathery voice broke the tense silence, leaning in to speak under cover from the noise.

"Did you rub the oil onto her?"

Deija turned, regarding him coolly out of the corner of her eye. This pompous fool was but a pawn, though a useful one. She saw no reason to indulge his curiosity. But the Master's plan hinged upon both their parts being played flawlessly.

"Yes, she is drenched in it," Deija replied evenly. "Not even her formidable powers can overcome that much *jurra*."

The man seemed satisfied, but pressed further. "Will it kill her? She cannot die so soon. It is of utmost importance that she lives. The Master was specific. He wants her humiliated, her name dragged through the muck before she is destroyed."

Deija suppressed an irritated hiss. Did this dim-witted fool think her an amateur?

"As long as she is washed off after the fight, she will not die. At least not from the oils," she replied tersely.

When he still hesitated, she added, "The poison will dull her reactions, make her slow and weak, but not to the point of being obvious. The onlookers will believe her tired, confused, or out of shape at worst. None will suspect foul play, maybe not even Sonja herself."

The man finally grunted his acceptance and turned his attention back to the arena. Deija exhaled in quiet frustration. Men and their ceaseless

questions! She need not explain herself to the likes of him. All that mattered was the final outcome.

Turning her focus back to the tunnel below, she watched a lithe, dark-skinned woman emerge into the smoky torchlight to raucous cheers and lewd shouts from the crowds. She moved with feline grace across the torch-lit sands, long limbs oiled to a high gleam. Deija recognized her as Kushite—likely a slave or captive forced to fight for her life in this arena. The ritual scars on her angular face and the bone piercings adorning her nose and ears marked her tribal origins. She wore only a brief leather loincloth and breast wrapping, leaving the rest of her sleek ebony form uncovered.

The Kushite glided and stretched, playing to the crowd's vulgar shouts and whistles. Sinewy muscles flexed beneath her oiled skin as she twirled a long spear with easy skill. Her bare feet danced across the sand, stirring up tiny puffs of dust as she turned and twisted. The dark beauty moved like liquid night, gaze haughty as she stared down the drunken onlookers. When she halted in a battle-ready pose, the horns sounded again and a towering blonde woman emerged from the opposite tunnel.

This new fighter was a stark contrast—pale and fair where the Kushite was dark as midnight, brawny and thickly muscular to the other's lithe grace. Shaggy fur pelts covered her torso, doing little to conceal the heavy swells of her breasts. The crude garb marked her as a barbarian from the frozen northlands of Asgard. She carried a broad hammer and shield, hefting them with ease despite their impressive size and weight. While the Kushite was oiled to gleaming, this northern giantess exuded raw power carved from her harsh environment. Jagged scars crisscrossed her bare arms and shoulders, speaking of past battles survived through sheer grit. The Aesir's face was a harsh landscape of frigid beauty—high cheekbones carved from unforgiving granite, a sharp aquiline nose like a spearpoint of ice, thin pale lips drawn in an expression of perpetual disdain. Eyes the pale blue of ancient glaciers stared out from beneath a shelf of craggy brow, broadcasting a cold ferocity and ruthlessness born from a life amidst the icy wastes. Sun-bleached flaxen hair streamed behind her in knotted braids interwoven with leather and bone charms as she strode onto the sand and raised her weapons high to meet the crowd's deafening cheers.



Despite the staggering difference between the fighters, only one would emerge alive from this contest. Such was the brutal law of the sands. As they squared off, the odds seemed stacked heavily in the Aesir's favor. She towered more than a head above the Kushite, her hammer and shield dwarfing the slender spear meant for quick strikes. But the crowd had seen enough upsets in this vicious arena to remain on edge, shouting encouragement to both fighters.

At the announcer's signal, the two women clashed in a blur of whirling weapons, primal battlecries and tribal ululations echoing over the onlooker's cheer. The Aesir hammered forward relentlessly, using her superior size and strength to full advantage. But the Kushite was too quick, dancing just outside her reach. Her spear darted and slashed with viper speed, drawing long streaks of red across the blonde giantess' pale limbs wherever they connected. Howls erupted from the stands as first blood was drawn.

But the superficial cuts did little to slow the northern brute's advance. She pressed the attack, backing the Kushite nearer to the arena's edge with each crashing blow of her shield against the warrior's upraised spear. Wood cracked and splintered under the onslaught in loud bangs. The nimbleness that had served the dark-skinned beauty well so far was fast failing her now, the Kushite's artful footwork giving way to desperation. With nowhere left to dance, her fate was sealed.

With a guttural shout, the sun-haired barbarian drove her shield forward, catching her lithe opponent square in the chest and knocking her off-balance. The Kushite's oil-slick legs went out from under her and she sprawled backward onto the sand, spear pieces skittering away. A hush fell over the arena at the deadly shift. Then a roar went up from the crowd as the giantess closed in, everyone sensing the end was nigh.

Fear finally broke through the Kushite's haughty mask as she crab-walked backward, the sand proving just as treacherous as her foe now. She made it only a few feet before her back met the arena's wooden barrier—a palisade of logs lining the rough stone walls. Trapped, she glared up defiantly, still grappling for the crippled spear just beyond her grasp. But the Aesir towered above her, hammer raised for the finishing blow, her giant form cutting off any means of escape.

From her prime seat, Deija saw the Kushite's courage break, lips drawing back from pearl-white teeth in a primal snarl of fear. Black eyes lifted skyward, awaiting the inevitable. In that frozen moment Deija thought she saw regret for a life half-lived, dreams left unfulfilled. Then the hammer fell with awful finality. A wet crack resounded across the arena as it crushed the dark beauty's skull. She slumped lifelessly against the wooden barricade in a growing pool of thick crimson. The Aesir let loose a victorious bellow, pumping her gore-slick hammer overhead. The deafening crowds answered back with fevered screams, drunk on the grisly spectacle.

Lips curling in distaste, Deija looked away as attendants in blood-stained smocks scurried out to drag away the crumpled corpse. They left trailing smears of dark red through the sand, which other workers hastily began to rake and turn over, absorbing the evidence of violence back into the thirsty earth.

Above it all the announcer's voice boomed out the victrix' name, extolling her triumph to the frenzied masses. But the barbarian had already departed below ground, moving with cold efficiency toward her next bout. For most combatants, there was no lasting joy or glory to be found in this vicious crucible—only survival, and the promise of further pain.

Deija's glance flickered down the row to where the governor still sat beside her hunched in the shadows, impassive face hidden by the low brim of his hat. She could sense his building anticipation in the subtle shift of his posture. *Let him revel in these bloody delights*, she thought disdainfully. His part in this scheme was minor, albeit annoying.

Within heartbeats, the next match was announced, but Deija hardly heard the words over the crowd's fervor. Her thoughts were focused on what awaited beneath the arena, where one more heroic soul was being led to slaughter. But this lioness was in truth a collared pet, though she did not yet know it—a queen of the open plains, momentarily declawed. Soon, Red Sonja would emerge on the blood-soaked sands below, where a very different reception awaited. Deija's breath quickened and she wet her painted lips in anticipation. The waiting game was nearly complete. She need only play her final strokes, then destiny would take hold.



Sonja stood poised before the hefty door leading into the arena, the cacophonous din filtering through in muffled echoes beyond the weathered planks. She peered intently through the small grated window, keen blue eyes tracking the previous bout's brutal climax unfolding on the blood-soaked sands outside. From her limited vantage, she glimpsed the hulking blonde warrior's final crushing blow upon her unfortunate opponent, eliciting a guttural roar from the encircling masses.

Sonja's grip tightened on her broadsword's leather-wrapped hilt in unconscious mirror of the violence transpiring mere yards away. The familiar metallic tang of freshly spilled blood reached her flared nostrils even through the intervening barriers of wood and stone. She inhaled deeply, pulse quickening in anticipation. Soon it would be her name resounding from those rough-hewn benches, her blade carving through smoke-filled air to the fevered screams of the onlookers. Yet the stark dichotomy of the scene made her frown.

In the harsh lands of Hyboria, women were often seen as lesser—valued only for the sons they could provide and the pleasure they could give men. Their worth was determined by their beauty and fertility alone. They had no voice, no rights. To the men who ruled this savage world, women were tools, slaves, breeders, playthings. Nothing more.

Even here, in this remote arena tucked amidst the Talakma Mountains, this attitude prevailed. The crowd that filled the rough-hewn stone benches was overwhelmingly male. Women scattered the stands in small groups, or clung to the sides of their menfolk. Their muted presence was barely acknowledged amid the raucous shouts and lewd jokes of the men, who spat and swore with impunity in their company.

The bouts staged below in the sand-strewn pit reflected this imbalance of power. Female gladiators were made to fight first, little more than a titillating warm-up before the 'real' events featuring male combatants. They were jeered and ogled by the crowds, who saw them as exotic novelties rather than true warriors. Bets were placed on their exposed flesh as much as their fighting prowess. Many women were made to battle nearly nude, for the

viewing pleasure of the masses. Victory mattered little to them, only survival.

The rare women who proved themselves exceptional fighters were still not respected, only resented. The men bristled at the idea of a mere woman besting one of their own. To avoid insulting their egos, female gladiators were almost never paired against men in the arena. The few who dared request such a match were mocked, refused, or met with threats. The message was clear—women had their place, and the sands were not it. They existed only to sate appetites, not challenge men's dominance.

Red Sonja was a grave affront to this unspoken code. Her skill with a blade rivaled the greatest male swordsmen, yet she was undeniably, dangerously female. Tales of her exploits in far off lands had reached even these remote parts, impossible to ignore. She had bested countless male challengers, heedless of their wounded pride. Her beauty stirred men's lust, while her warrior spirit earned their resentment. She was a threat to their supposed supremacy simply by existing. To these men, her womanhood negated her skill. She was a freak, an aberration of nature that needed to be put in her place. They would never accept a mere woman standing as their equal. But they would flock to watch her be humbled and humiliated before their eyes. For Sonja to be defeated by a male gladiator in combat would restore the proper order of things in their minds. It would put this brazen upstart back where she belonged—on her knees before a man.

Such an outcome was highly unlikely, given Sonja's peerless skill. But even if she won, it would be a hollow victory. Thunderous applause would greet a male victor for vanquishing a woman. For Sonja, defeating a man would earn only cold stares and muted mutters. Every match she won would be seen as an affront to manhood. Her name might draw crowds, but it would not draw respect. True glory in the arena was reserved solely for men.

Sonja knew all this, and did not care. She would enter the sands regardless, uncowed by the scornful odds stacked against her. She would battle not for their validation, but for her own satisfaction. For though she was despised by many, she was legend. And her skill would humble even the most scornful onlooker. They would be helpless but to acclaim her prowess, even as they cursed under their breath.

Let them come, Sonja thought with icy resolve. Let them pit their finest

warriors against her, this brazen woman who dared step out of her place. She would cut them all down, one by one, until there were none left standing to question her worth. These men may rule the world, but they could not rule Red Sonja.

And then it sounded; the thunderous cheers of the crowd reverberated through the cramped preparation vault as the announcer's voice boomed out, "Red Sonja!"

At the call of her name, Sonja straightened from her casual lean and moved to stand before the heavy wooden gate barring her path. This was the moment she had been waiting for. The arena's seductive thrill coursed through her veins, setting every sense alight. Beyond, she could hear the crowd's bloodthirsty roar rising to a fever pitch in anticipation of her entrance. Sonja inhaled deeply, feeling the familiar battle-calm settle over her core. She flexed her fingers, limbering her neck from side to side. Then she lifted her chin, rolled her shoulders, and strode with long-legged grace through the widening gap of the gate as it groaned open before her.

The deafening noise hit her first—screaming, shouting, stomping and clapping cascading down from the packed stands hewn directly into the surrounding rock. Smoke and torchlight filled the air above the central pit, creating an otherworldly haze. The smells of humans and beasts, iron and leather and sweat mingled into a pungent stench. This was the raw, chaotic energy that fueled the arena crowd's lust for violence.

As Sonja moved out onto the sands to come into full view of the audience, the noise rose to a deafening volume in a cacophony of stamping feet and clamoring voices. The din was primal chaos, the crowds drunk on violence, hungry for more grisly spectacle. Sonja soaked in their admiration nonetheless, letting it feed her battle lust. Her piercing eyes scanned the surroundings as she emerged, taking in every detail with tactical precision. The arena was relatively modest, able to hold perhaps two or three hundred spectators at capacity. Still, their combined energy charged the smoky air to a fever pitch. Heat shimmered above the blood-soaked sands, carrying the iron tang of freshly spilled carnage. The crowd surrounded the oval pit on all sides, effectively hemming the combatants in. Many held overflowing skins of ale or chewed mouthfuls of charred meat as they shouted down at her. She read

their faces, seeing lust and fascination mingled with lingering uncertainty. But recognition was slowly dawning in many eyes. Excited murmurs of 'She-Devil' and 'Red Sonja' rippled through the stands.

Sonja walked with poise, a sensual sway to her hips, broadsword glinting ominously over one shoulder. Her gleaming chainmail molded to every curve, leaving no doubt that a lethal beauty graced the sands this night. The polished steel links contoured smoothly to the flare of her hips and cinched waist. Intricate etchings accentuated the sensual lines, glinting silver in the smoky torchlight. The metal cups barely contained the full swells of her breasts, cleavage glistening with a sheen of fragrant oils. Fiery red hair spilled freely over her shoulders in an elaborate series of braids laced with silver thread.

Sonja kept her piercing gaze fixed straight ahead as she crossed the blood-dampened sands, the raucous shouts fading to background noise. She inhaled deeply, centering her focus amid the chaos. This was her element, the heady thrill of violence and admiration alike. After endless months of wandering dusty roads and nameless campsites, the intoxication of the arena pulsed through her veins once more.

From their rough-hewn seats, the masses gaped in awe at the lethal warrioress striding with predatory elegance below. She was power and grace embodied, sleek muscles honed for battle. Men looked on her lush curves with lust, women with envy, all struck dumb by her bold sensuality. None had witnessed her equal here before. Legends of the peerless Red Sonja resounded across all Hyboria, but to see her formidable physique and beauty in the flesh was breathtaking.

As Sonja reached the arena's center, she halted and turned a slow circle, giving the audience a full view of her magnificence. She squared her shoulders, standing tall and proud. One hand rested on her cocked hip, the other loosely gripped her broadsword's bejeweled hilt sticking up over one shoulder, the pose accentuating her oiled and swelling bicep. For a lingering moment she paused, surveying the crowds as if they were her supplicants and she their empress. Her face was upturned to bask in their rapturous cheers and crude scowls alike, red mane cascading down her broad back. A hint of a smirk curled her full lips. She had missed this part.



Gradually, the baying crowds fell into awed murmurs at the splendid sight of Hyrkania's infamous warrior-maiden standing imperious before them. None here could know the true depths of her skills, but her sensual, deadly aura transcended mere reputation. Their awe and reluctant admiration aroused Sonja's battle lust, every sense heightened for the violence to come.

Among the masses crowded onto the rough-hewn benches, Sonja's keen gaze spotted Deija seated several rows up, the clever minx having secured herself an ideal viewing angle overlooking the bloody sands. Their eyes locked across the smoky distance, blue ice meeting flashing amber. Sonja's full lips curled into a knowing grin meant only for her enthusiastic companion. In return, Deija's painted mouth curved subtly, the hint of a smug smirk creasing her exotic features. She blew an exaggerated kiss down toward the fiery warrioress commanding the sands.

Sonja did not return the flirtatious gesture, keeping her focus honed amid the chaos. Such frivolous shows of romantic weakness had no place in the harsh crucible of the arena. Her piercing eyes instead flicked to the shadowed figure seated beside Deija, broad hat obscuring his face. There was something off about the man, an instinctive tingle of unease slithering up Sonja's spine as she lingered on his shaded visage. But she brushed the concern aside—this was her stage, her time to shine. Let them all gaze on in awe.

With deliberation she turned and knelt on one leg to draw her broadsword from its scabbard in an elegant sweep of her arm. The distinctive rasp of the blade leaving its sheath drew fresh cheers from the throngs above. Sonja raised the sword high in theatrical challenge. She held it aloft a moment, muscles flexing, letting the crowd's anticipation crest. Then with a sharp yell that cut through the din, she swept the blade down and out in a silvery arc before transitioning smoothly into a series of warm-up swings, thrusts, and slashes designed to impress with their speed and precision. The sword whistled sharply as it sliced through smoky air, extensions of her deadly will. Sonja pivoted and spun, imaginary enemies cut down on all sides by her razor swings.

The crowd answered her flourishing display with raucous cheers and screams, stomping their approval. Any lingering doubts about her identity

were swiftly fading. Female or not, their champion had arrived to slake their bloodthirst. Excitement surged through the throng of a show above and beyond anything previously witnessed.

Sonja flowed through one last series of moves before halting in a ready pose, brow dotted with perspiration, breasts heaving. The rapid exertion combined with the sweltering torchlight overhead had brought a light sheen to her bare skin. A purposeful choice on her part—the gleam of oil and sweat only enhanced her curves, and the rise and fall of her chest kept all eyes fixed attentively. She knew well how to play the crowds as surely as her blade.

As the cheers rolled over her, Sonja allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction. No arena could contain her energy for long. She had proven herself in far greater battles across all of Hyboria. But she would gift this backwater town a taste of true sword mastery before she moved on.

Abruptly the thunderous applause died down as all heads turned toward the far tunnel. The creaking of wood and iron signaled the opening of another gateway. Sonja tensed, sword at the ready.

A lone figure emerged—a swarthy man clad in a black leather hood, loincloth, and heavy boots, chest bare, oiled skin gleaming. In his gloved hands he held a trio of thick leather leashes, each connected to a straining mountain cat—lean, muscular beasts nearly the size of dire wolves, with brindled fur and massive clawed paws. Sonja’s eyes narrowed, reading their agitated body language. Khitani hill panthers, most likely captured from the nearby mountain forests. Northern cousins of the great sabertooths, though just as deadly.

The panthers’ handler barked a quick command and unhooked their leashes. And just like that, the fight was on. Goaded by shouts from above, the beasts fanned out to encircle Sonja, intent on attacking from all sides. Low snarls rumbled from their throats, slitted eyes gleaming with predatory focus. Sonja tensed, boots pivoting in the sand as she tracked the circling animals. Unlike most cats, hill panthers were intelligent pack hunters, capable of coordinated strikes. She would need to be mindful of all three at once. The beasts were surely ravenous, their captivity only amplifying their lethal edge. Killing came as naturally to them as breathing. They would show no mercy to cornered prey. But Sonja was no easy meat. She intended to remind them why

she was as much alpha predator as any beast stalking the wild lands of Hyboria.

With pounding hearts, the crowd watched the standoff, every eye locked on the solitary figure ringed in by stalking death. Only madmen and heroes fought panthers in open combat. Was Red Sonja's mettle real, or merely legends exaggerated beyond truth? They were poised to witness the reality firsthand.

Sonja turned with the cats, sword at the ready. Her piercing gaze remained calm, breaths measured. When the largest panther's haunches bunched to attack, she was prepared. It sprang at her back, but Sonja was already pivoting away from those raking claws. Her sword whistled in a lateral cut, finding purchase in the beast's shoulder even as it landed and skidded past her.

Hot crimson sprayed the sand and a roar ripped from the panther's maw. The tang of freshly spilled blood hit Sonja's senses along with the excited shouts from the crowd above. But she had no time to savor the first blow. The other two cats immediately seized the advantage of her shifted stance, rushing in concert from either flank.

With a feral yell, Sonja swung her blade around and met their combined assault head on. She ducked the swipe of one claw-tipped paw while parrying the other panther's fangs with the flat of her sword. The impact sent jolts down her arms. For a heartbeat the three figures were locked together, woman and beasts straining sinew against sinew. Then Sonja pushed the furred predators aside with a mighty roar and rolled away across the sand to come up in a battle-ready stance anew, eyes blazing.

Sonja held them both at bay through sheer diligence, her flashing sword cutting sinuous patterns in the smoky air before her, preventing further advance. The injured panther had withdrawn several paces, red-stained fur bristling as it limped and snarled. But the other two prowled hungrily, seeking any lapse in her defense.

With feline swiftness, the larger of the two feinted left then dove right, seeking to flank Sonja's sword side. But she spun to meet it, broadsword whistling. The cat twisted lithely at the last second, dodging a disemboweling slash. Sonja's blade only grazed its hindquarters, drawing a fresh line of red in

the brindled fur. The panther hissed in fury and pain but did not retreat. These beasts would keep coming relentlessly until one or both combatants were dead.

Seeing a momentary opening, the other panther charged straight on at Sonja's exposed back. Sonja just managed to pivot and get her sword up to parry wicked claws aimed at her throat. The impact jarred her arm to the shoulder. Hot breath gusted across her face, reeking of old meat. For a heartbeat she stared into the predator's cold yellow eyes from inches away, black lips peeled back from two-inch fangs that dripped with hunger for her tender flesh.

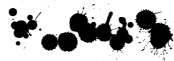
With a snarl of her own, Sonja shoved hard and sent the heavy cat skidding sideways. It nearly lost its footing on the treacherous sand. But the cunning beast quickly recovered, circling back to look for the next opportunity to strike.

Sonja's chest heaved, fat drops of sweat beading on her brow and dripping down between her breasts half-confined in gleaming steel. The sweltering arena air was a miasma of smoke, blood, and rancid fur that clung inside her throat with each harsh breath. Her ears rang from the ceaseless screams and shouts cascading down from the bloodthirsty onlookers surrounding her.

This was the razor's edge she thrived upon, the exhilaration of a true fight for survival. Nothing else compared to the savage joy of steel singing in your hand while death circled on all sides. Three ruthless predators sought to end her, but Sonja was in her element. She bared her teeth in a fierce grin, sword ready to paint more red lines in fur and flesh.

The panthers seemed to sense her rising battle lust and hesitated, feline gazes calculating. The smallest shifted sideways, trying to draw Sonja's attention. But she kept her focus centered, tracking all three beasts at once. The injured one was tiring, a red stain spreading through the dusty fur of its shoulder, but the other two remained lethally quick. She had damaged but not disabled them.

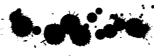




Above the Arena's smoky haze, Deija watched closely, keen eyes assessing the scene below. This fight should have been over swiftly, yet somehow Sonja still held her ground against the deadly beasts. Something was clearly amiss. The effects of the poisoned oil should be apparent by now, slowing Sonja's reactions, dulling her formidable battle skills. Yet, if anything, she seemed more ferocious and focused than ever.

Deija gripped the stone bench until her knuckles whitened. This was not how events were meant to unfold. The Master's plan hinged upon Sonja being humbled before the rabble, her legend cracked open to reveal frailty beneath. Instead, she was carving up these beasts as if they were mere kittens.

Had the apothecary given faulty draughts? Had she herself somehow erred in administering the dosage? Deija's thoughts raced, but outwardly she kept her composure. There was still time to adjust the strategy. Sonja's downfall was foretold. This was but a stumble in the path.



In the arena below, the panthers seemed to confer silently. Then as one they rushed Sonja in coordinated formation, seeking to overwhelm her through sheer force of numbers. Sonja's eyes narrowed, reading their intent. Her sword whistled high and low, meeting slashing claws and snapping fangs from all sides. The beasts sought to hem her in, deny her any room to maneuver. She backpedaled swiftly, boots sliding through the blood-dampened sand. If she allowed them to pin her against the arena's edge, their combined mass would swiftly bear her down and tear her apart.

A claw tip raked down Sonja's thigh as she spun away, opening a bloody furrow through chainmail links. Pain flared but she ignored it, refusing to slow. The smallest cat seized the opportunity, lunging past her guard from the right flank. This time Sonja was a hair too slow bringing her sword around. Fangs clamped down on her wrist with lightning speed before she could wrench it back.

Sonja snarled a vicious curse as cracking pain lanced up her arm. Only the leather bracer saved her wrist from being crushed. Still, the panther clung

tenaciously, jerking its head from side to side like a hound with a bone. Sonja staggered, nearly driven to her knees. Fresh blood ran hot over her fingers where claws pierced the leather, seeking purchase.

With a roar, she dropped her sword and slammed her fist between the panther's eyes with enough force to crack bone. It yowled and released its hold, skull reeling from the blow. Snatching her freed arm back, Sonja clamped a hand to her injured wrist, feeling the bite ache beneath damaged leather. Four deep punctures oozed blood, but she could still flex her fingers. No permanent damage done.

The punched panther slunk away, shaking its head, yellow eyes dazed. But the other two pressed their advantage, nearly shoulder to shoulder as they homed in for the kill. Flicking her sword into the air with a booted toe and snatching it mid-air, Sonja scrambled backward, boots sliding unevenly across the arena's floor. The wooden barrier loomed just paces behind, cornering her with nowhere left to retreat.

Desperation ignited Sonja's battle instincts. She would not be dragged down so easily, like prey brought to bay. With a savage cry, she launched herself forward, feigning a stumble. The panthers reacted instantly, claws raking inward to eviscerate their seemingly weakened quarry.

But at the last instant, Sonja dropped and rolled right between the pouncing duo. Their slashing claws barely missed, swiping past either shoulder close enough to tear strands of red hair fluttering in the wind of their passage. But Sonja's desperate gamble paid off. She tumbled clear of their closing fangs and surged upright, now behind them in a wide-legged stance, sword at the ready.

The panthers skidded in the bloody sand, carried past by their own momentum. Before they could whirl back, Sonja was upon them. With all her fury she hacked downward, steel blade cleaving deep into flesh and bone. Her razor-sharp broadsword nearly severed the head of the larger cat in one savage chop. It collapsed thrashing, gushing crimson across the arena floor. Sonja wrenched her blade free and turned upon the second panther, still orienting itself. Flashing steel opened its throat in a gaping red smile, dropping the beast to choke out its life twitching in the scarlet sand.

Sonja staggered back, gulping air. Her wrist blazed with pain, matching

the burning in her thighs and shoulders. Sweat streamed down her face and neck, tracing paths between full breasts heaving underneath soaked leather and chainmail. The scent of blood—human and animal—filled her lungs with each ragged breath. She could feel hot trails dripping from multiple wounds, mingling with the grimy perspiration slicking her body. Iron and salt coated her tongue, simmering the fury within. This was the arena at its rawest. Kill or be killed, there was no third option. And Red Sonja would never yield.

The remaining panther limped a wide circuit around her, bleeding shoulder matting its brindled fur red where her first blow had struck true. They eyed each other with equal parts pain and hatred—two apex predators unwilling to submit. Sonja welcomed this final challenge. Her body rang with fatigue and injury, but she would end this contest on her feet. Let the pathetic beast throw itself upon her steel if it dared. She had already sent two of its brethren to the underworld's hunting grounds. This one would swiftly join them if it sought vengeance for their spilled blood.

As if sensing her indomitable will, the panther hesitated, torn by urges to flee and attack. Meanwhile, Sonja stood her ground, tall and impassive, sword lowered in clear invitation. All that remained was for one of them to blink first. The arena held its collective breath, spectating masses perched on the edges of their seats.

Then slowly, the panther began to back away, the low rumble in its throat almost seeming to convey reluctant submission. Sonja kept her blade pointed in its direction and expression fierce until the beast withdrew fully into the shadows of the tunnel from whence it emerged. As the iron gate slammed shut, locking it below, exhilaration surged through Sonja's veins. She barely registered the crowds' deafening cheers.

Throwing back her head, Sonja loosed a primal scream of victory that silenced the arena in a heartbeat. The echoes of her roar reverberated through the stands as she stood bloody and indomitable, her piercing gaze sweeping the stunned spectators. Mere moments later, the crowd came alive again, erupting into raucous cheers and thunderous applause in tribute to her sanguine and unyielding triumph.





Up in the stands, the governor turned to Deija, his expression grim beneath the shadowed brim of his hat.

“You claimed this poison would leave the She-Devil weakened and weary. Yet she dispatches those beasts as if swatting flies.”

He gestured angrily at the arena below, where attendants in blood-stained smocks were dragging away mauled panther carcasses. Sonja stood triumphant amid the gore, chest heaving as she basked in the crowd’s rapturous cheers.

“You have failed to deliver on your vow,” the governor accused, rotten teeth bared in a sneer. “I paid good coin so your potions would humble that brazen witch before all of Kusan. But she has only grown more bold!”

Deija met his glare coolly, outrage simmering beneath her facade of poise. How dare this scarred worm question her skills? She reminded herself that angry outbursts would not serve the cause.

“Patience, my lord,” she purred. “Remember, the cats were not supposed to kill her, just exhaust her. The true test is yet to come. I have saved the best for last.” She let her painted nails trail feather-light over the back of his gloved hand.

“Watch and see, the She-Devil’s humbling approaches.”

Though still dubious, the governor seemed mollified by her cryptic promise. He pulled his hand away with a grunt and turned his attention back to the bloody arena.

Inwardly, Deija seethed. Once this was over, she would demand recompense from the Master for dealing with this fool. For now, she masked her irritation behind a sly, knowing smile. Yet she could not help but feel deeply troubled by the unfolding events, though she refused to show it. The governor’s rightful accusations gnawed at her composure. How could Sonja still be battling with such ferocity and focus despite the poison that must be coarsing through her veins by now? She had followed the apothecary’s instructions to the letter, thoroughly massaging the *jurra* oil into every inch of the warrioress’ bare skin before her fight. By all accounts, Sonja should be slowed in body and senses, an easy mark for the beasts and whatever

opponents followed. Yet she had carved through them like a scythe through wheat.

Deija's brows drew together as she mentally retraced each step for the hundredth time, seeking any error or omission in her administration of the toxins. But she could find none. Unease slithered through her core—had she somehow failed the Master? If so, the consequences did not bear thinking on. Outwardly she maintained her facade, clapping and cheering Sonja's bloody victory along with the rest of the crowd. Her painted lips stretched in an adoring smile as their eyes met once more across the smoky arena, though inside her thoughts churned with uncertainty. When Sonja turned away, Deija nibbled her full bottom lip between white teeth before resuming her enthusiastic applause. There was still time to sway the battle's outcome, she reassured herself. She must hold faith in the Master's intricate plan. Failure was not an option.



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Anonymous

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Edgar Nightbird

About the Author

Writing has always been my passion in life, and I intend to keep on doing it until I drop. I am intrigued by the many aspects of sex and human intimacy, the deviant parts of our psyche, and the exchange of euphoria between souls.

To that end, I am a creator of Erotica, often focused on strong, capable women being subjugated and tested in perilous ways. This could be anything from cruel predicament bondage or torture in a medieval dungeon to the daily struggle of life in a harsh dom/sub relationship.

I see writing as a means to experiment with these fantasies and push the boundaries of what is hot or not within a safe environment. Today I invite you to join me on that journey.

-Edgar

Contact information

Patreon: patreon.com/edgarnightbird

Email: edgarnightbird@gmail.com