

Gladiatorix

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The following is an extract from Chapter 3 of *Gladiatorix*.

THE NEWS

Dead silence.

'No.' I shook my head. 'No. I am not doing this.'

Des stared hard at the view, anywhere but into my face.

So I stared at him, torn between anger and grief. 'I told you last time, I would never do this again.'

He swung back to me, pleading. 'Kannon . . .'

'Des. It's finished. Over. As far as I'm concerned my life started the day Yuki found me.'

I looked down at his battered leather briefcase sitting at our feet. I thought he'd given up years ago, but I should've known from the bag. When I was young, every time he'd arrived with that briefcase it'd meant he had another lead. He'd kept the police investigation going long after everyone else had given up.

I'd never wanted to know the details. Why would I?

My biological parents had already taken their best shot at getting rid of me. Dumped me in a cave to die, to strangle to death.

Apart from anything else, I don't know what I'd do if I found them. Probably something that'd involve gaol time.

Des knew how I felt. He said softly, 'Kannon, if I'm right then your parents didn't abandon you.'

'You mean, try to murder me.' It was a statement, not a question.

'No.' He tapped his bag. 'I think we've been completely wrong about that all along. This new lead explains why, after all that publicity and searching, no-one ever came forward. Why there were no clues to be found. It wasn't your parents who left you in that cave at all. If I'm right then the answer is much more complex than we ever could have guessed.'

'Complex, you say?' Tonight had already been complex enough. Ledbetter's crap. Cockburn's ultimatum.

I stared down at the ocean shimmering coldly below; I really didn't want to have this particular conversation. Not tonight. Not ever.

'Kannon. You have to watch this recording.' Des had that stubborn look. 'This time I think I really have something here. That I'm onto something real and new.'

He touched my arm. 'Kannon. You have to give it a shot.'

I shook my head. 'I can't, Des. Don't ask me to. Not tonight.'

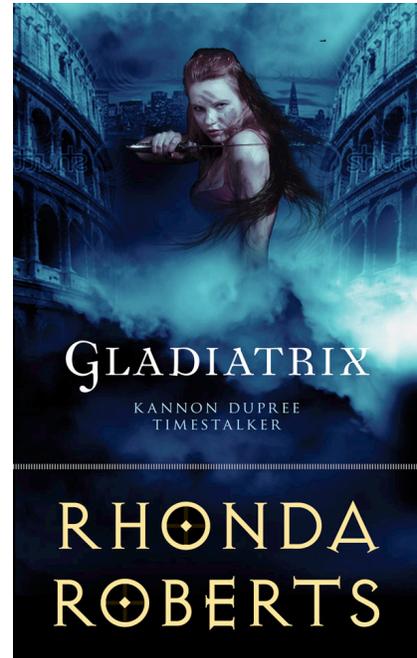
'If I'm right then we have to act now. Right away. This can't wait till you're ready.' His voice was hoarse with feeling. The sound hurt my ears.

He'd aged a lot in the past year. Didn't walk that well any more, and there was a hint of desperation around the eyes. But I'd been through this before. The last time Des had come here with the same hope, that I hadn't just been thrown away, I'd been eleven. And that one time had nearly crushed me. It had nearly crushed us all.

I searched his face. His sad, kind face. But this was Des. Des wouldn't do this lightly. He knew exactly how much this would cost me.

'Please, Kannon. Watch this with me. Now. Tonight. You know I wouldn't ask this unless I was sure.'

I let out a long breath and said softly, 'Okay. Go on. Show me.' He wouldn't go home until I'd done what he asked. And I was older, tougher now. 'I'll watch but don't expect me to get involved in anything.'



I immediately began bracing myself for the worst. What was this recording of? It could be anything . . .

‘Sure,’ he said with confidence.

Des still believed he could bend the world to fit his vision. It’d made him a formidable cop but less relaxing as a close relative. Growing up with Yuki and Des: between a rock and a hard place.

We moved into the lounge room with the pup padding behind. Des set it all up and turned the screen slightly in my direction. He grabbed the remote and sat next to me on the worn four-seater couch. Then he hit ‘play’ on the remote.

The screen bloomed into a brightly coloured image. Mainly green. Grass green . . . What . . . ?

It was today’s cricket match between Australia and the West Indies. Cricketers in uniforms . . . playing on a field in the sunny Caribbean . . . Australia was batting, the West Indies player was running up to bowl and . . .

‘I’ll just cue it up,’ said Des, as he fast-forwarded through another five minutes of play.

I wrinkled my forehead in confusion. ‘What’s going on, Des? You got a lead while recording a televised cricket match? This afternoon?’

He shook his head. ‘Wait till you see. Then we can discuss it.’ The game finished and he pressed ‘play’.

The next program was The Linken Fox News Hour, a US news segment shown every weekday afternoon on the Australian public broadcasting channel. It gave summaries of US news stories, and the occasional overview of current events.

Since he’d retired, Des watched every news program he could find. Said it made him feel less isolated, still a part of the world.

The Linken Fox News Hour? I’d been expecting to see terrible footage, to have to brace myself as I watched. But a US news show?

The melodramatic opening music featured the sound of frenzied typewriters and staccato trumpets, then the camera focused in on the presenter, a heavily made-up blonde woman, sitting behind a news desk with a logo on the wall behind her.

‘This is Susan Mornington,’ she said, with an American accent, ‘and this is The Linken Fox News Hour.’ She gave an expert smile, then launched into her presentation with vigour, ‘Today we’re going to focus on the constitutional crisis.’

She paused to change camera angles. ‘It all started when the Moral Legion began holding public rallies across the nation, demanding a change to the constitutional right to religious freedom. The Moral Legion is an alliance of radical, right-wing Christian groups, and in the past they’ve been linked to the white supremacy movement.’

The screen changed to a night scene. A tall, thin man in a white suit was addressing a brightly-lit stadium full of cheering fans.

‘White Gregson, head of the Moral Legion,’ Mornington continued in voice-over, ‘aims to outlaw paganism and make Christianity the state religion. He claims paganism is leading to the destruction of Western civilisation, and destroying the moral fibre of the American people. In particular he’s targeted the Isiacs, worshippers of the Egyptian goddess Isis, for his most serious attacks.’

I grabbed the remote and pressed ‘pause’. White Gregson froze in an unflattering close-up as he gloated over his audience.

‘Des,’ I said, trying to be patient. ‘Why are we watching this? This is an American news segment on their problem with religious terrorism and the push for constitutional amendment.’

There’d been a lot of coverage on it here over the past few years and things seemed to be getting worse, an escalation in the bombing of Iseums and hate crimes. And, apart from anything else, it was making our own politicians very nervous. If the mid-west Bible belt started in against the rest, then a new Civil War could be triggered.

‘Des? Apart from wanting me to be an informed and concerned citizen, what’s this got to do with me?’

He stayed focused on the screen. ‘Just be patient, Kannon. You’ll understand in a minute.’

‘It’s The Linken Fox News Hour. Just how long a minute are we talking about here?’

I checked his face. It was a little whiter than when he had arrived. What had happened today to make him fixate on this stuff? And on American politics of all things? Then I remembered. His doctor had told us both that recovering heart surgery patients often had mood swings, sometimes even depression. Could it be that? Was he trying to solve the unsolvable, any way he could?

Des stared at me, hard. And then down at the remote. ‘Turn it back on, Kannon, This is just the introduction,’ he said, exasperated. ‘What’s coming is worth seeing.’

I frowned, but turned back to the screen. I’d agreed to watch so I would. But then I was driving him home myself. I pressed ‘play’.

The image of a smirking White Gregson unfroze and Mornington’s voice-over restarted. ‘Of course this conflict isn’t new, Isis worship has existed in the US for as long as Christianity. It came with the Old World settlers: up through Mexico with the Spanish, and down from Canada with the French.’

Footage of an old, weathered Greek-style temple, with columns and a slanted roof, appeared. It was topped by a statue of Isis as a winged woman. She was not unlike the Statue of Liberty. Strong features, on top of a strong, commanding body.

‘Looks a bit like the statue above the temple in Sydney, but much older,’ I said.

The first Australian Iseum had been built in Quebec Bay on Sydney Harbour. Unlike North America, there’d only been Isiacs in Australia since the nineteenth century. They’d been mainly French dissidents, part of the Quebec Rebellion, who’d been sent here by Britain as exiles from Canada.

The camera pulled back to give a wider view, to give context to the temple. The screen now showed the old temple sitting on a corner opposite New York’s Central Park. The entrance was full of sleek devotees wearing designer dresses and power suits.

‘And it looks richer than the Sydney one, too,’ said Des. Which was cynical but accurate.

Organised religion had never been a big thing in this household. If Des had any preferences I didn’t know about them. Probably his police work had eliminated the desire to travel in packs of any kind. Yuki was a Buddhist but had kept it a private practice. She’d led by example, probably the only method that would’ve worked with me when I was young.

Mornington reappeared to say, ‘Isis worship has now become the second most popular religious affiliation in the US, and some predict that it will overtake Christianity in this new millennium.’ She paused for effect. ‘Two years ago White Gregson and the Moral Legion announced they had proof that the rise of the Isiacs had a sinister side to it, that their rise in popularity is not a natural one.’

‘Sinister?’ I snorted. ‘I don’t know much about Isis worship in the States, but the Isiac temple here seems more interested in holding bake sales to raise money for the local hospital than anything else. Just like St Barney’s.’ St Barnabas was the Catholic church just down the road from them.

Des was not impressed with the accusation either. ‘Yeah. Bombing someone seems much more sinister to me.’ The link had never been legally proven, and the Moral Legion had refused to admit it, but everyone knew they were directing the attacks.

The screen changed back to a close-up of White Gregson haranguing the crowd in a twangy Southern accent. ‘The Isiacs are a part of Satan’s bid to gain power on Earth.’ Sweat poured down his face as he shook his clenched fist. ‘I have always told you that their religion is founded on satanic ritual.’

He pulled a rolled-up document out of his white suit pocket. ‘Now I can prove it. Their teachings are founded on Egyptian texts, first translated and interpreted in ancient Rome by their revered founding father, the Hierophant.’

He waved the roll of paper. ‘Here is a copy of a pact the Hierophant made with Satan. In his own handwriting. The pact was to enable Satan, and the lesser demon Isis, to rule the new millennium. This millennium!’

The stadium surrounding him roared out their anger and hate.

‘Satan and the lesser demon . . .? This is just divisive fear-mongering.’ I picked up a section of the newspaper and fanned myself. ‘Why are we watching this crap?’

‘Yeah and patience is your strong suit, Kannon. Hang on.’

Mornington again, her face serious. ‘Though Gregson and his organisation disclaim all knowledge of, or links with, the terrorists, his accusations have led to more open violence. California — an Isiac stronghold, along with New York and Louisiana — has been the worst hit. In the past two years hundreds of people across California have been injured in attacks on Isiac temples. And eighty-seven have died.’

A shot of a frail old woman staggering out of a burning temple and into the arms of a hefty fireman filled the screen.

‘This isn’t Christianity. Jesus didn’t tell people to bomb the Romans.’ I stopped fanning myself and threw the newspaper across the room. It hit the wall with a solid thwack. ‘I just don’t get it. Why does religion raise so much hate?’

'Fear,' Des said tiredly. 'It always comes down to that. People hate what they fear.'

By now I'd given up any expectation that this coverage had anything to do with me at all, other than indicating that I had to take Des in to see his doctor again tomorrow. But the story itself was pulling me in. The violence was so pointless, but so hard to solve. We'd been lucky here so far.

Mornington said, 'Early last year, in response to the death of sixty-five people in the San Diego Iseum bombing, the Governor of California, James Haverstock, asked the President for special assistance. The following is footage taken at the press conference Haverstock called at that time to announce their solution.'

The screen changed again to show a jowly older man in an expensive suit standing on a podium. He looked polished, slick, artful. The caption underneath read: Governor James Haverstock.

Haverstock addressed the camera directly. 'As well as presenting a public danger to the people of this state, this civil discord has far-reaching consequences for us as a nation. It has to be resolved, and as peacefully and completely as possible. To this end I have spoken at length with the leaders of the United Isiac Coalition.'

He turned to introduce a well-dressed, middle-aged couple standing behind him. 'Dr Cynthia Jones and Mr Xavier Fuentes.' The camera zoomed in on them. Jones was tall and blonde, Fuentes was dark and shorter. 'And with the representative of the Moral Legion, Mr White Gregson.'

Gregson was also standing behind the Governor, but as far away from Jones and Fuentes as he could and still stay within camera range.

The Governor turned back to the camera. 'I believe together we have worked out a solution that will stop the violence. Both sides are willing to abide by the findings of a special inquiry into the activities of the Hierophant in ancient Rome. The representatives of the Isiacs are determined to have his name, and their religion, cleared of any criticism. And Mr Gregson's organisation is keen for their own claims to be put to the test.'

At that, Jones, Fuentes and Gregson stared into the camera in a confident, but fixed kind of way.

Haverstock continued. 'The document, presented by the Moral Legion as proof of the satanic pact, was discovered by archaeologists from the Université de la Sacré Croix who were excavating the foundation of the main Isis temple in ancient Rome. The text has been scientifically dated back to the early first century AD and there is no doubt that it is a legitimate, historic artefact. As well, a range of experts agree that the handwriting matches other scripture written by the Hierophant.'

Des looked at me. 'Is this aboveboard?'

I said, 'Well, this is the first I've heard of all this stuff.' I'd pretty much stopped watching the news over the past year. I was too busy and it was too depressing.

Off-camera, reporters started shooting questions at the Governor. A barrage of voices flowed over him and he called for silence. 'However, it is the translation and interpretation of the content that is in dispute. This document seems . . .' he emphasised the last word, 'to be the description of a special ritual. One involving human sacrifice.'

The audience broke out at that, everyone shouting questions. But the Governor silenced them with a single shake of his head. 'This sacrifice was intended to evoke a pact with a supernatural being.' He paused.

'Now, the Isiacs deny that living sacrifice, of any kind, is a part of their modern rituals. They assert that the Hierophant, on whose writings they base so much of their beliefs and practices, preached only love and compassion. They claim that the document is either a fake, or is being misinterpreted. So,' he paused again, 'to resolve the controversy I have received permission from the President to use the services of the NTA.'

Des turned to me and said quickly, 'That's the National Time Administration.'

'Of course it is,' I spluttered.

The NTA and NASA. They'd been started at about the same time, and we'd all been learning about them in school ever since. Everyone knew what the acronyms stood for. National Time Administration. National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Then I checked his face. Why was he making that particular point?

Des pointed at the screen. 'Watch.'

The Governor turned to someone off-camera and beckoned. A tall, dark-haired woman stepped onto the stage to stand next to him. She wore a navy skirt suit with the NTA silver infinity symbol shining on her breast pocket.

He introduced her, saying, 'Time Marshal Victoria Dupree, the most senior field officer in the National Time Administration, will undertake the mission.'

He gave her a nod of respect. 'Marshal Dupree, as you all know, has a very distinguished service record, and we're extremely lucky to have her on board as this is, potentially, a very dangerous assignment. She will travel to

8AD, the year the disputed document is believed to have been written, and investigate the Hierophant and any matters related to this accusation.'

A male reporter yelled into the silence left after the Governor stopped speaking, 'But who will she report to? Is this going to be an impartial inquiry?'

In response to that question, Gregson and the two Isiacs standing behind the Governor all shifted on their feet at exactly the same time, like Siamese twins, conjoined by their anxiety.

Very interesting body language, shifting feet . . .

So none of them really trusted the Governor? Or maybe the process he'd set up? Or maybe they doubted their own positions . . .?

I cut that line of thought short. I'd been around Des too long. Everyone, and their motives, had become a target of speculation.

'Marshal Dupree,' answered the Governor, 'will be reporting directly to me, and the evidence gathered will be presented to a specially convened committee of the California legislature. Mr Gregson and the leaders of the United Isiac Coalition have agreed to abide by their findings.'

Encouraged by his new responsiveness another reporter shouted, 'But what are the possible outcomes? What will it all mean?'

Yeah. Good question.

The Governor replied with care and tact, 'If the document is false, if the Hierophant is not involved in any such practices then . . .' He turned back to White Gregson for confirmation, and Gregson gave a confident, full-toothed smile for the camera. The Governor continued, 'Then the Moral Legion will drop its push for constitutional amendment and call for religious tolerance.'

Then he looked to Jones and Fuentes for their response. They didn't smile, just nodded in agreement. 'And the Isiacs have agreed that if the Hierophant did, in fact, perform human sacrifice, then they will voluntarily, and with full disclosure, submit their organisation to a Congressional inquiry into their practices.'

'It's not going to work,' I snapped. 'The side that loses will still dispute the findings. You can see they're thinking that way already. It won't work.' I calculated, 'If this press conference took place early last year, maybe a year ago, then the mission must be well under way, if not finished.'

I turned to Des. He'd seen the rest of the recording. 'So what happened? What did Marshal Dupree find out?'

'No results reported as yet.' He qualified that with, 'Well, none reported in this segment anyway.'

'What? They do this news segment on it then don't give an update on her mission?'

'There's only another few minutes of this story left to go,' Des said, quietly. 'And the rest isn't about the mission.'

The screen went into a close-up of the Time Marshal standing next to the Governor. The dark-haired woman, Victoria Dupree. We'd learnt some basics about the NTA and the marshals at school, but I didn't know much more than that. The US was the only country with a time portal, so I had no hope of ever going through one. The closest I'd ever get to travelling in the past was by digging it up.

Dupree's eyes gleamed with a measured intensity. She didn't look like she'd let much get in her way. I'd read somewhere once that the time marshals were all law officers. Just like the first astronauts were all pilots.

Yeah, she looked like a real law officer. Scanning the crowd in front of the podium, searching for potential trouble.

And she was the senior NTA field officer? They were the ones who actually went through the portal, who went into the past. What kind of woman made it to that position? I wondered how many missions she'd been on. Had they been dangerous? She must have been better than good to make it to the top in that place.

The marshals still had an air of the Wild West to their reputation. Gung-ho. Against all odds. Macho. Their missions, on behalf of their own government and as a favour to others, had covered every time and place in our collective histories. The Civil War. France during the Revolution. Rome during the Fall.

We'd all heard the stories: exposing a mafia-paid Supreme Court judge, recovering World War II military secrets, uncovering who really murdered Mahatma Gandhi, finding the lost treasure of the Incas . . .

'I wonder what missions she's been on,' I mumbled. 'I must look them up . . . I wonder if she was on the one that . . .'

'Kannon,' Des tapped my hand, 'this is it, now. Watch.'

I frowned. What the hell was I supposed to be looking for in this stuff?

Des leant forward with the remote, his thumb ready to hit the pause button.

I leant forward, too, mimicking his posture, trying to read his face. 'What is it, Des?'

'Just listen.'

'However,' Mornington's voice intoned over the close-up of Dupree, 'now Governor Haverstock has come under heavy attack from both sides of the controversy. The mission still has not been completed, nor have any preliminary findings been presented for public scrutiny. In response, the Governor has announced today that he will be giving a special press conference in five days' time.'

An old black-and-white photograph of a much younger Dupree replaced the press conference close-up.

'But the Governor is not the only one who has come in for sharp criticism. The NTA has been less than forthcoming about the mission and many now wonder whether even the famous Marshal Dupree can bring such a hazardous and difficult assignment to a successful conclusion.'

The voice-over continued, 'But this is not the first time Marshal Dupree has been at the centre of a furore. Twenty years ago, Victoria Dupree was a San Francisco homicide detective, the first woman to reach that level in the San Francisco Police Department. At that time, criminals involved in a murder case she was investigating abducted her two-year-old daughter, Celeste.'

Twenty years ago? Two?

My heart started to pound.

Des looked at me, nodded, and then turned back to the screen.

So this was it.

The screen changed to a colour photo of a young Victoria Dupree kneeling with her arms around a little girl. A little girl with big black eyes, and white-blonde hair swept up in a ponytail. She was dressed in a cream, frilly dress and black tap shoes. They were both smiling into the camera.

'Tragically for Marshal Dupree, Celeste was never found,' Mornington stated.

Des pushed the pause button and the image froze in place.

He rose and, next to the image of the affectionate mother and happy child, he slapped a black-and-white photo taken of me the day I was found. The photo was smaller in scale than the screen image, but it was easy to see the likeness. Each showed the same little girl with dark eyes, framed by long white hair.

Des tapped the screen image with his stubby finger. 'I believe that Victoria Dupree is your mother,' he turned to me. 'That you are Celeste.'