

GLADIATOR SCHOOL

BOOK I



BLOOD OATH

DAN SCOTT

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SCHOOL

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First published in the UK in 2013
by The Salariya Book Company Ltd
This edition published in the UK in 2024 by Hatch Press,
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
4th Floor, Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-80078-909-8

Printed in the United Kingdom



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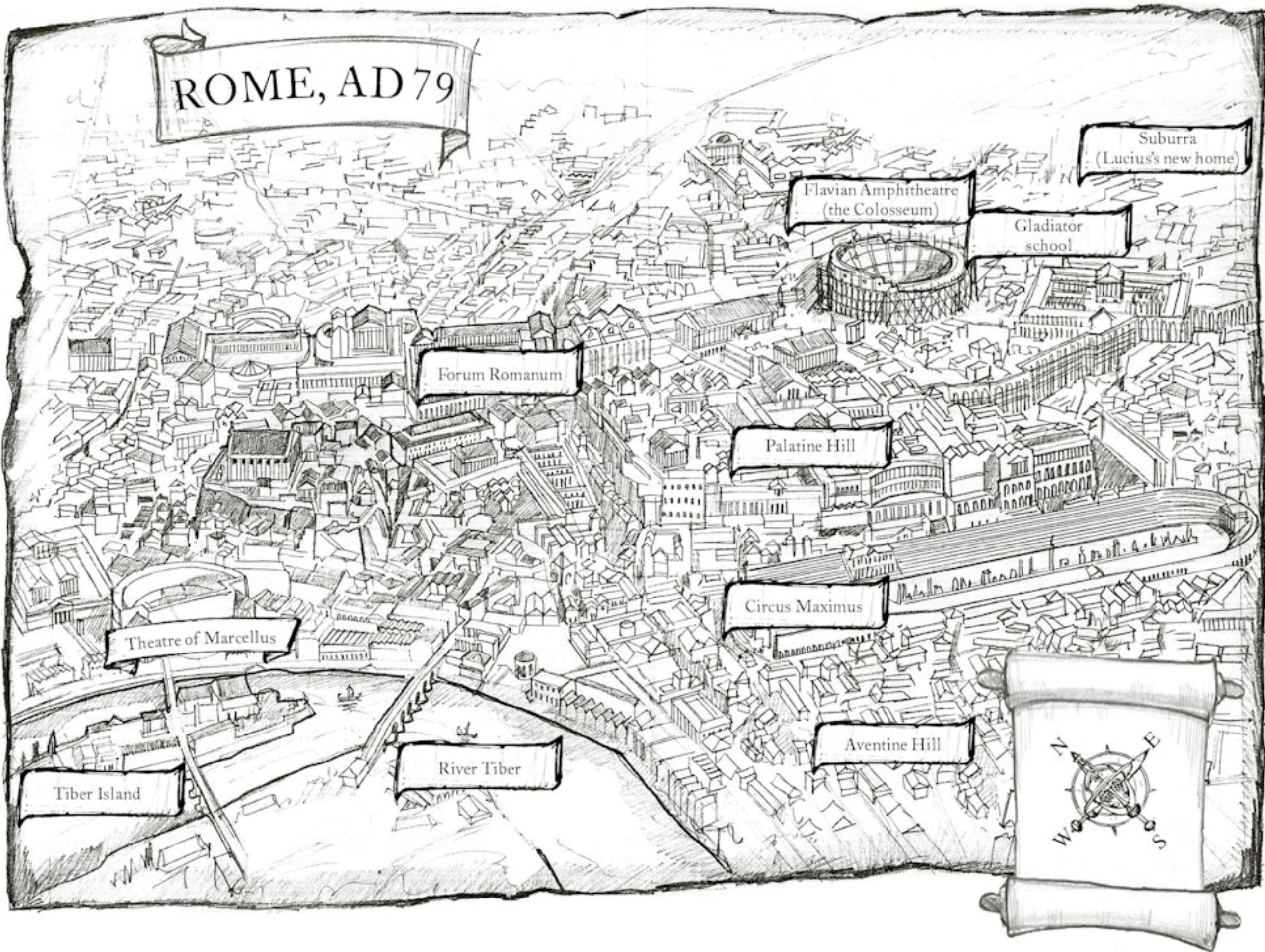
BOOK 1

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ROME, AD 79





ROME
JULY AD 79

The Roman Empire flourishes; the world is at its feet and there is a new emperor in command. Determined to be a fair ruler, Titus has decided to put an end to trials and executions based on the hated Law of Treason. He plans to rid the Senate* of the networks of informers that have built up over the years.

Around the Senate, those who have informed on others dread discovery, and none more so than the most feared informer of all – the so-called Spectre.

When his real name is revealed, his freedom will be forfeit, and his family will suffer the shame and ignominy of his actions...

** Senate: the ruling council of ancient Rome.*



THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Lucius, a Roman boy
Quintus, his older brother
Aquila, their father
Ravilla, their uncle
Caecilia, their mother
Valeria, their sister
Isidora, Lucius's friend, a slave
Rufus, a slave
Crassus, a trainer of gladiators

PROLOGUE

TRAITOR!

ROME
JULY AD 79



Lucius stared at the household gods.

Everyone else seemed able to shout and cry and wail and rage, but Lucius couldn't even open his mouth. From the moment the soldiers had burst in to arrest his father and found him missing, Lucius's eyes had been glued to the little wooden statues.

The soldiers had stormed through the villa, overturning furniture, rattling their swords and yelling, 'We arrest you, Quintus Valerius Aquila; in the name of the Emperor, show yourself!'

His mother had collapsed, trembling, onto the couch in the atrium,* clasping Lucius's sister Valeria

* *atrium*: the entrance hall of a Roman villa.

close to her. Valeria, who was made of sterner stuff, had wriggled free and stared at the soldiers in round-eyed wonder.

Lucius's older brother had found plenty to say. Quintus, named after his father, was never lost for words. He had followed the soldiers through the villa as they searched for his father, warning them of the dire punishments that would fall on their heads when his father returned, threatening them with curses and finally invoking the household gods to protect the family against the intruders.

But, throughout it all, Lucius had stayed in the atrium, his back pressed against the cool marble walls. The statues were still wearing their crowns of flowers and leaves. Less than a day had passed since they had celebrated their mother's birthday. And now his world was crumbling around his ears.

'Where is he, boy?'

A soldier was standing in front of him, demanding an answer.

'The Senate?' snapped Quintus from the doorway to the atrium. 'The Forum?*' Where else would you expect one of Rome's most respected senators to be at this time of day?'

'He's not there,' Lucius said.

His voice sounded croaky and unfamiliar.

'What are you talking about?' asked Quin.

* *Forum: the marketplace of ancient Rome, which was also the place for business meetings and political discussions.*

He sounded irritable and indignant. *How funny, thought Lucius. Quin always knows everything. How come he doesn't know this?*

'Explain yourself,' rapped out the soldier, who was evidently losing patience fast.

'Look,' said Lucius.

Finally, Quin followed the direction of his brother's gaze and his eyes fell on the altar. Lucius saw Quin's posture change. His shoulders sagged, his face registered confusion and disbelief.

'The dog's gone,' he said.

Of the three statues that represented their household gods, the wooden dog had always been their father's favourite. It had stood on the hearth altar for as long as Lucius could remember. Aquila had said that it represented the faithfulness of true friends. He would never take the statue on a normal working day. But it would always travel with him when he made a journey.

'He's taken the statue?' demanded the soldier.

Lucius nodded.

The soldier's mouth set into a grim line. 'Right,' he said.

He called his men and ordered them to his side.

'You're going?' Quin asked.

'Yes,' said the soldier. 'We'll leave you to your shame.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Quin had recovered from his initial shock and was truculent again.

The soldier turned to stare at him. To this man, they were simply a job. He had no feelings about them, good or bad.

'It means that your father is a liar and an informer,' he said. 'It means that he's been found out and he's fled before he can be tried.'

Lucius looked away from the statues at last. Quin had gone very pale, and he was trembling.

'My father's not a traitor!' he declared.

But his words sounded empty, and the soldier clearly wasn't interested in what he had to say. Lucius's eyes fell on the hearth altar again. Whether their father was innocent or guilty, for some reason he had certainly left Rome. For now, they were on their own.



PART ONE

NOVICIUS

CHAPTER I

ROME
AUGUST AD 79



Fight!' bellowed Crassus. 'This isn't fighting! Are you a baby? Are you a coward? FIGHT!'

The trainer grabbed Quin's arm, held it high in the air and punched him in the stomach. As Quin doubled forward in pain, Crassus jabbed him in the back with his elbow and then twisted him head over heels to the floor with a body-cracking thud.

'Show a little style!' Crassus yelled. 'Get up! Make it exciting!'

Lucius, watching his brother from the side, felt his stomach heave. He had felt the thud as Quin hit the sandy floor. It was only Quin's second day as a novicius* in the gladiator school. There would

be many weeks – perhaps months – of this ahead of him.

Quin had always seemed strong and powerful. But now, standing barefoot in the middle of the arena, wearing nothing but a loincloth, he looked like a child. Blood and sweat were smeared across his back and shoulders.

Other novicii gladiators were watching from the side steps, and Lucius had ventured out of the back rooms of the school to see how Quin was getting on. Now he wished that he hadn't bothered.

'No sword, no shield, no armour,' he muttered. 'It's not fair.'

'They have to learn to fight with no kit at first,' said a voice behind him. 'The weapons come later.'

Lucius spun around and saw a slave girl standing there. Her thick, black hair hung in two heavy plaits around her oval face. Lucius didn't know what to say. A month ago he would have smiled and thanked her. He would have known his own status. Now, working in the gladiator school, he didn't even feel like himself any more. He certainly didn't feel like talking. He turned back to the arena, where Quin was on his back again.

One of the watching gladiators turned to Lucius. His lips parted in a black-toothed grin.

'Your brother's not even out of his swaddling clothes,' he said, spitting onto the sand. 'We eat his sort for breakfast.'

* *novicius* (plural: *novicii*): a trainee gladiator.

Clearly this gladiator was already trained and fighting for money. Lucius didn't answer but, as he heard another cry of pain from Quin, his throat burned. He would be sick if he kept on watching. He had to get out. Luckily, he had an excuse to leave: his uncle had asked him to deliver a message to someone in the Forum.



The sweltering streets of Rome seemed less busy than usual. Lucius wove his way towards the Forum, the cries of street sellers ringing in his ears as he darted through the throng of carts and chariots. The acid smell of urine and excrement stung his throat. He stumbled over a litter of piglets trotting across his path and the owner yelled at him: 'Out of the way, boy!'

'Sorry,' Lucius murmured, scooting to the side of the street, where a meat vendor who was selling piles of fresh red lungs was splattering everyone in the vicinity with blood.

He hadn't been paying much attention to his route until now. He knew the streets so well that his feet would carry him to the marketplace while his mind was still in the arena with his brother. But now he realised that he was standing on the street where their old home was. The shops set into the villa walls were selling the same cloths and clay pots of olive oil as always. Everything looked just as it had been in the old days.

Don't look, said a voice in his mind. He knew that it was a mistake. But he pressed his hand against the cool outer wall of the main entrance. Lucius closed his eyes.

'One week, six days, three hours,' he said under his breath.

Ravilla, his uncle, had taken them away from the villa almost immediately. It had had to be sold, for all their father's money had disappeared with him. Their slaves and most of their possessions had been sold with it. Lucius's tutor Agathon, the cook Nicia, who had always made sure Lucius's dog had a good meal, the maids, the cleaners... they were all gone. Until now, Lucius had never known a day without them.

He had even lost his dog. Quin had been angry with him for being upset over a dog. But he couldn't forget Argos's faithful brown eyes. He had gone missing on the day the soldiers came – another victim of their family tragedy.

Lucius wondered if another family was living in the villa now. Who was looking at the murals on the walls? Who was sitting in his father's place? He hated every hour that passed. Every moment took him further from the last time he had seen his father. Visions of what had happened flashed before him. His mother, her eyes red-rimmed, leaving her home with a few treasured possessions. Her face when she saw their new home above the shops in the grotty Suburra district, which Ravilla had somehow found the money to buy for them. Quintus's blue eyes growing steadily

colder as the days passed. 'Friends' avoiding them in the street. Everyone believing that his father was guilty.

Even more painful were the older memories. Studying with Agathon. Playing with the slaves' children in the free afternoons. His father stepping over the threshold at the end of the day. His smile when he saw Lucius waiting. His low, soft voice, reading aloud from his papyrus* scrolls. It gave Lucius an almost physical pain to remember his father's open, honest face. And yet, if the evidence was to be believed, he had been a merciless informer under the previous emperor, and had brought about the deaths of many honest people.

A sound came from inside the villa and Lucius's eyes flicked open. This wouldn't do. He had a message to deliver for Ravilla; his brother was still in the arena; and his father had gone. Those days were over now. He should be like Quin, and focus on the present instead of the past. He darted away, feeling as guilty as a slave caught dawdling.



As soon as Lucius had delivered the message, he slipped into a narrow passageway and leaned his head back against the wall. It was warm and rough, and somehow made him feel safe. He allowed his mind to drift back again.

* *papyrus*: paper made from Egyptian reed fibres.

Until Quin had made his terrible decision, Lucius had been sure that his father would return and clear up the whole mess. It didn't even occur to him that anyone might think differently. Not until the evening when his uncle had installed them in the cramped flat, and Quin had said, overly casually, 'You've invested money in a gladiator school, haven't you, uncle?'

'Yes,' Ravilla said, sounding surprised.

Lucius looked up at his brother, wondering where this was leading. Any conversation between his father and his uncle about the gladiator school had always ended in an argument. Aquila disapproved of Ravilla's gambling.

'Could you get me in?' asked Quin.

Everyone had laughed. It was a ridiculous question – of course Quin was joking. A free citizen of Rome – a lad who had barely taken the toga* – renouncing his citizenship and taking on the status of a slave? Only Quin's face remained serious.

'I mean it,' he said.

'Quin, don't mess around,' Lucius began.

'Shut up,' said Quin, and in that instant Lucius knew that he was deadly serious. His fun-loving boy-brother seemed to have completely disappeared.

'It's not an option, Quin,' their mother said.

But Quin didn't even reply to her. His eyes were fixed on Ravilla's face. Ravilla turned and stared out

* *toga*: a long, loosely draped white garment, worn only by adult male Roman citizens. Quin, a teenager, is just old enough to wear one.

of the window at the dirty roofs of Suburra.

Lucius looked out too. He stared at the crumbling communal dwelling opposite them, with the large black letters painted on its walls, advertising living space. His thoughts were still swimming. He could not believe that in the space of a few days they had come from their beautiful villa, with its mosaics and slaves and portraits and library, to this cramped flat in Suburra.

They had been able to bring only a few personal belongings and a few pieces of furniture. The streets here were so narrow that his uncle's slaves had found it difficult to carry some of the furniture along them. The villa had contained more rooms than they had needed. Now they had just a couple of rooms above a stinking fast-food shop.

'This cannot be,' Ravilla said, his back still turned on his nephews.

'Yes it can,' Quin stated. 'Other citizens have done the same.'

'Men who have run into debt,' said Ravilla. 'Men with no other option.'

'I have no other option,' said Quin. 'You say I can't leave and join the army.'

'You can't,' said Ravilla for the umpteenth time. 'The stain of your father's actions – they would never accept you.'

'Very well, then,' said Quin. 'This family has to eat somehow. I can earn money, once I'm through the training.'

At last Ravilla turned to face Quin. The look on his face made shivers run up and down Lucius's back.

'I'll look into it,' he said quietly.



After Ravilla had gone, the arguments raged all night. First their mother and then Lucius tried to make him see reason.

'The minute you take that oath, you give up all rights,' Lucius said. 'You'll be treated as a slave.'

'There are advantages,' Quin said, not meeting Lucius's eyes.

'Oh yes, *fine* advantages,' said Lucius. 'The chance to die a gruesome death. The chance to suffer—'

'The chance to earn some money,' Quin snapped.

'You could become a teacher and earn money.'

'A pittance,' said Quin. 'In case you hadn't noticed, I have a family to support.'

'Not just you,' Lucius said. 'I'm the second eldest. I could do something – join the army...'

Quin wheeled around and gripped his brother's arm tightly. His blue eyes blazed. 'No, Lucius!'

'Why not? If you can be a gladiator—'

Quin shook him to shut him up. 'Weren't you listening? Thanks to Father, you'd never be accepted. Anyway, what's so bad about being part of a group? A group that stands for courage and loyalty and discipline? In the arena I could win honour and fame

even greater than I could get in the army. I wouldn't have to fight more than two or three times a year. I'd learn military skills. I'd have fame, wealth—'

'If you won,' Lucius broke in, trying to stem the torrent of words. 'And if you didn't win? Oh, that's right – *death*.'

'I'm doing this for the family! I'm trying to save us from poverty and shame.' It was as if he had blocked up his ears to all sense or reason.

'You'll be their slave!' Lucius yelled. 'Do you realise that? They can keep you in chains if they want. You'll belong to them, and they'll never leave you alone for a second.'

'Only until I'm trained,' Quin went on, his voice softening. 'Once I've fought in the arena I'll have more privileges. And I'll eat better than most commoners. Why does this make you so angry? Get a hold of yourself.'

Lucius felt himself shaking, and tears pricked at his eyes. Quin was right – he had lost control. He blinked the tears back and mastered his voice.

'Father calls it "infamous",' he said. 'He'd never allow it.'

'Aquila's not *here*,' hissed Quin. 'And he stopped being my father the day he abandoned us.'

A shock passed through Lucius's body. He glanced at his mother, but she lowered her eyes.

And that's when Lucius knew that he was the only one who believed in his father's innocence.

CHAPTER II



‘**H**ot sausages! Hot soup!’
The bellow of the street-stall vendor made Lucius open his eyes with a start. He had wasted time daydreaming. He pushed his memories to the back of his mind, storing them in the darkness. There was no time to look at them now. He hurried back in the direction of the school, feeling shaky and alone.

Quin was no longer in the training arena. Lucius looked around the side steps, expecting to see Quin’s face among the others, intently watching the more advanced gladiators as they practised. His eyes scanned the faces, which were becoming as familiar to him as those of his own family. He saw the primus palus, Ruga, a Murmillo,* whose left eye and cheek were deeply scarred.

Lucius shook his head. A few weeks ago, he had no idea what any of these words meant. Now the language of the school was becoming as natural to him as breathing. *Primus palus* – ‘first pole’ – were the best gladiators in the school. And there were so many different types of gladiator – the *Murmillones* with their fish-shaped helmets, the *Bestiarii* animal fighters, the Thracians with their curved daggers... he was quickly learning to recognise them all.

Lupus and Bestia, the next in the *palus* hierarchy, were sitting together as usual, pointing at the gladiator that Crassus was training and no doubt discussing what he was doing wrong.

‘He’s not here,’ said a voice behind him.

Lucius looked around and saw the slave girl again. Her voice was crisp and clear. He stared at her.

‘Don’t you speak to slaves?’ she enquired.

‘Of course I do. I...’

She waited, and he cleared his throat. He didn’t have to explain anything to her, even if he knew how.

‘Where is my brother?’ he asked.

Her dark, straight eyebrows rose a little.

‘The doctor is attending to him,’ she said.

He took a step forward, but she didn’t move.

‘You’re blocking my path,’ Lucius said.

‘You’ve barely opened your mouth since you started working here.’

* *Murmillio*, *Bestiarius* (plural: *Murmillones*, *Bestiarii*), etc.: some of these different kinds of fighters are described and illustrated on pages 206–207.

He took another step forward, but she didn’t move a muscle. She was the same height as him, but he was small for his age. He was so close that he could smell her. She smelled of sawdust and sweat and blood.

‘Excuse me,’ he said in a low voice.

‘I want to know what you are,’ she said, just as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘They don’t explain anything to us.’

‘I am Lucius Valerius Aquila—’

‘I know *who* you are,’ she broke in. ‘I was asking about your status. You come here every day. You’re part of the familia.* You take orders from Crassus as well as your uncle. But you don’t sleep here and they pay you money. So what are you?’

She had actually interrupted him! He was shocked into silence for a moment. The girl folded her arms and raised her eyebrows a little higher.

‘It’s a job,’ said Lucius.

‘What job?’ she demanded. ‘Sometimes you help us. Sometimes you run errands. Sometimes you assist the doctor.’

‘It’s just a job,’ he snapped.

He was shaking. This girl was asking for answers that he didn’t have. He had a job at the gladiatorial school, and that was all he knew. He did what he was told, and he received a small wage to add to the family’s weekly income.

‘Let me past.’ He shoved her aside and hurried towards the room where the doctor treated the

* *familia*: a troupe of gladiators.

wounded. He paused in the doorway. Quin was lying face down on the floor while the doctor bathed a map of cuts on his back. The doctor, Aelius Eumenes, looked up. Eumenes was Greek by birth, having grown up in the city of Pergamon. Lucius had heard that Eumenes had studied under the famous doctor and teacher, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, and that he'd learned his anatomy by studying the corpses of animals killed in the arena. He had the hard face of a man who had seen, perhaps, too much suffering in his life. He met Lucius's eyes, and for a moment Lucius thought he saw a flash of pity, but then it was gone.

'Ah, Lucius, just the person,' he said briskly. 'I could use your assistance here.'

'Lucius?' came Quin's muffled voice. 'Is that you? Did you see me fighting? How did I look?'

Lucius stepped forward and took the wet cloth that Eumenes held out to him. He dabbed gently at the dried blood around one of the gashes.

'Lucius?' asked Quin again.

'I saw some of it,' said Lucius. 'It looked... painful.'

'It was wonderful!' said Quin. 'I felt really alive, Lucius – I can't explain. Being in the arena... it's like having been asleep all my life, and then suddenly waking up.'

Lucius saw Eumenes's lips twitch, and Quin was silent for a moment. The atmosphere changed.

'I wouldn't expect you to understand,' said Quin, in a different voice.

Blood was trickling down Quin's sides in rivulets. It made Lucius feel sick. His body was covered with bruises of all colours from earlier training sessions. Lucius kept dabbing at the fresh cuts, pressing his lips together as hard as he could. What was the point of arguing? Quin had given his oath, and he belonged to the school now. Lucius had said everything he could to change his brother's mind, but it was useless. Quin didn't want to listen.

'They've assessed me and decided to train me as a Retiarius,' he said, unable to disguise the note of pride in his voice.

'Are those the ones with the big shields?' Lucius asked.

'No, that's the Secutores,' Quin said with deliberate patience. 'A Retiarius uses a net and a trident. I was hoping I'd get Retiarius. Crassus is the Doctor Retiariorum,* so he'll be training me, and he's the very best.'

'Right,' said Lucius, who in his mind's eye could still see Crassus punching Quin. 'Well, that's... good.'

'Would it hurt you that much to sound a bit pleased for me?' Quin demanded, half lifting himself from the ground.

Lucius sat back on his haunches.

'Stay still,' growled Eumenes.

Quin lowered his body again, grimacing as he did so.

* *Doctor (plural: Doctores) Retiariorum: trainer of the net fighters.*

'It's just that you make it sound like it's *all* fun, and it's not,' said Lucius, starting to bathe his brother's back again.

He was trying to make his voice sound reasonable and calm, but he had a feeling that it wasn't working. Quin let out a long sigh.

'Just have some faith in me, will you, brother?' he asked in a low voice. 'Just for once?'

Lucius felt his cheeks grow hot. He did have faith in Quin. He had always thought his older brother could do anything. But, this time, Quin was confronting mortal danger as if it were one of his games.

'You'll be all right,' said Eumenes, standing up. 'Another few weeks and injuries like that won't even draw blood. You'll have skin like leather.'

There's something to look forward to, thought Lucius. But he didn't dare to say it out loud. Quin stood up gingerly, and then grinned. Lucius grinned back at him. His brother hadn't looked this happy ever since their father had left. Even his startlingly blue eyes were sparkling like they used to when he had some new adventure planned out.

'Come on,' said Quin, putting one strong arm around Lucius's thin shoulders. 'Let's go home.'

'I can't just go, Quin,' said Lucius. 'I've got a job to do. And neither can you. Slave status, remember?'

Quin stared at him for a minute. Lucius wondered why he had never before noticed how cold his brother's blue eyes were.

'It's not my fault,' Lucius added.

'You didn't *need* to get a job here,' Quin said. 'I'll be earning money soon enough, and Uncle Ravilla takes care of us.'

'You're not earning money yet,' said Lucius. He didn't say anything about their uncle, but he remembered his father saying that Ravilla seemed to either have money to burn or be on the brink of poverty. It was strange that Quin hadn't picked up on that, when he was usually so clear-sighted.

'Lucius, step outside and get some air with your brother,' said Eumenes. 'I'll let Ravilla know you helped me treat him, and that I've suggested you both take a break.'

He left the room, and Quin glowered after him.

'He's just being kind,' said Lucius. 'Come on, let's go before Ravilla thinks of another errand for me.'

They made their way from the small room out to one of the narrow entrances used by the slaves. Lucius leaned back against the wall, but Quin seemed restless.

'Let's walk,' he said. 'We can take a few minutes.'

The streets were less busy than they had been earlier. Quin was walking carefully, as if each step hurt him. Lucius knew better by now than to offer sympathy. He wished that they were going home, and then winced at the thought. He had been thinking of the old villa, not the hovel where they were living now.

'I heard Mother calling out in her sleep last night,'

he said. 'She was calling Father's name.'

'She should just forget him,' said Quin.

'I was starting to think she had,' Lucius went on. 'She never even mentions his name.'

'She's got more sense than you, then.'

Lucius was silent, but he felt as if his chest was burning with the effort of keeping his words locked inside. Quin gave him a sideways glance, and his eyes softened.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I know you're upset. But I'm just trying to be practical. Father's gone – and he's not coming back. He's crawled away somewhere like all the other traitors.'

'Aren't *you* upset, Quin?'

Their conversation was interrupted as they made way for two patricians* who were striding along together, their togas swirling, wafting scent towards the boys. Lucius recognised one of them; he had been to their father's villa many times in the past. Now his eyes passed over the two boys as if they had become invisible.

'There's no point in dwelling on the past,' Quin said as they continued walking.

Whether he was replying to the question or commenting on the patricians, Lucius wasn't sure. He didn't know how to respond to a statement like that, anyway. Quin had always been the one with the quick reply or the witty retort.

* *patrician: a member of an aristocratic Roman family.*

'I don't want to dwell on the past,' Lucius said.

He paused, trying to think of the best words. Quin hadn't been so approachable since he'd started training at the school. He didn't want to break the spell.

'You've been different lately,' he said. 'More serious.'

'Finding out that my father's a filthy traitor has done that.'

'You really believe he's the Spectre?' Lucius asked.

Quin stopped and looked at him with a mixture of pity and irritation.

'Do you really believe he's not?' he said. 'Think about it, Lucius. The Spectre has been informing on people for years, and that means it has to be someone who has held an important position for a long time. It has to be a senator – how else would he have been able to report private conversations that happened inside the Senate to the emperor?'

'But Father *bated* the culture of informing on friends and neighbours,' Lucius said. Even as he spoke the words, he knew how weak they sounded.

'Yes, you're right,' said Quin sarcastically. 'The Spectre would be *so* likely to stand up for informers – as if that'd be the best way to protect his true identity. Grow up, Lucius.'

Lucius restrained the urge to give his brother a shove, and they started walking again. A darting shadow caught his eye. He turned to see a dog running by. It was large and heavy with brown fur – a Molossus, similar to his beloved Argos.

Everything was different now. Argos was gone, and Quin was different. He looked up at his brother and felt a wrenching sensation in his stomach. Before everything turned upside down, his brother had laughed easily and often. Now this grim expression was far more normal. Lucius couldn't understand it. Didn't Quin want to believe in their father?

'There's something I haven't told you,' he said. 'I haven't told anyone.'

'What?' Quin asked.

'That day – the day the soldiers came...'

'What about it?'

'I found a message in my room... from Father.'

'Oh, a letter telling his favourite son that he was innocent,' said Quin, his lips curling. 'How sweet.'

'Shut up and listen, will you?' Lucius said, wishing the wrenching feeling in his stomach would go away. 'It wasn't a letter – the soldiers would have found that when they searched. It was a secret message.'

'I don't understand.'

'I'd been reading something by Pliny, and the scroll was still lying on the table in my room. Father had underlined a phrase in it. I know that it was him. It wasn't underlined the last time I looked at it.'

'Typical,' said Quin. 'Always the same, you and him huddling together over a pile of dusty scrolls.'

'It said *Multi famam, conscientiam pauci verentur*,' Lucius went on.

Quin frowned. '"Many fear their reputation, few

their conscience" – what's that supposed to mean?'

An image flashed into Lucius's mind: his father reading Pliny's work to him, explaining the things that he didn't understand. The man who had sat beside him, teaching him with such patience, could *not* have betrayed his friends and companions.

'It was Father's way of reminding me that he doesn't care about what other people do,' he said. 'He sticks to what he believes is right and wrong – he goes by his own conscience. He left it so that I would *know* he was innocent.'

'Lucius, that's an admission of guilt,' said Quin, sounding suddenly tired. 'He's just saying that he had his reasons, that's all.'

Lucius was speechless. For a moment he wondered if Quin had actually known their father at all.

'Our father believed in fairness and honesty and equality!' he said, his voice cracking. 'That message meant that he wouldn't have betrayed that, because he would have been betraying his own conscience.'

'Yes, and lots of people did, under the last emperor.'

'Not Father.'

Abruptly, Quin turned on his heel and started striding back towards the school. Lucius had to break into a half-run to keep up with him. It must have hurt Quin to walk that fast.

'Quin, why can't you just—'

'I've got to get back to the familia,' said Quin through tight lips.

'But—'

'I'll be in trouble.'

Lucius felt as if the weight of the world had dropped onto his shoulders. He watched his brother disappear back into the school, and then followed him inside.

Quin had already disappeared into the rooms the gladiators used for washing and sleeping. Lucius couldn't see him among the press of bodies and the clash of weapons and armour. He could hear the men making jokes and talking about their training session. Crassus spotted him and waved his arm.

'What are you standing about for?' he demanded. 'Think your uncle pays you to do nothing? Get outside and help clean up.'

The training arena would be spattered with blood and would need fresh sand. It would stink of sweat. Lucius started breathing through his mouth as he walked out between the columns. The slave girl who had spoken to him earlier was already there, scooping up the bloody sand and tipping it into a wooden bucket. She seemed to sense that he was there, and looked up, her eyes meeting his directly.

'Have you come to help or to watch me work?' she asked.

'To help.'

'Then take a bucket and a shovel.'

She jerked her head to one of the corner fountains, where another bucket was lying on its side. Lucius

closed his eyes and pushed away his memories. *Our villa, our slaves, our life... it's all gone.*

He picked up the bucket and shovel, and set to work. Most of the blood, from earlier in the day, was brown and drying, but then he found some splashes that were still red and wet. Lucius paused and looked down at them. He felt sick. Then a hand touched his shoulder, and he flinched.

'It's not his,' she said.

He turned his head and met her steady gaze. For the first time, it looked friendly.

'How can you be sure?' he asked.

'I was watching. This patch belongs to Felix.'

Lucius must have looked blank, because she went on, 'He's the one who was laughing at you earlier.'

He bent down to scoop up the bloody sand, and when he turned again she was back at work. They made their way around the arena until it was clear. The girl put down her bucket, and Lucius walked over to her.

'What now?' he asked.

'Fresh sand.'

'You don't say much, do you?'

'I thought you didn't want to talk,' she replied.

There was a glint of humour in her eyes. Lucius had never shared a joke with a slave girl before.

'What's your name?' he asked, as they spread the fresh sand.

'I am Isidora,' she said, tilting her chin upwards

a little as she spoke.

'Have you always worked here?'

'No, not always.'

Lucius waited. He had learned from his father that silence could sometimes be more useful than speech.

'I used to work in your uncle's household,' she said. 'I was glad when he sent me to work here instead. You're not like him.'

'What do you mean?' asked Lucius. 'What was he like to you?'

'What do you think?' she replied.

Lucius thought about his uncle's thin lips and sharp eyes.

'You didn't like belonging to him, then?' he asked.

'Do you?'

A jolt passed through Lucius's body. She was right. They all belonged to Ravilla now.

'But he's been kind,' he said. 'He's found us a place to live; he makes sure we have enough to eat. He—'

She stopped him abruptly by holding one slender, brown finger to his lips.

'You're a worker now,' she said. 'He owns you. And sooner or later, you'll see for yourself how he treats his possessions.'

They spread the rest of the sand in silence, and then picked up the buckets and headed towards the kitchen. Lucius noticed that she lifted the buckets as if they contained nothing more than air. Her arms looked as powerful as those he had seen on a statue

of the goddess Diana. His arms, by contrast, felt as if they were being dragged slowly out of their sockets.

'So it's better here, is it?' Lucius asked.

'If being a slave can ever be *better*.'

'My father was always – I mean – he taught us to be good to the slaves,' said Lucius, suddenly feeling awkward again. 'He said that it was one of the most important things you could ever do in your life – to be responsible for the life of another human being.'

'Then I wish I had belonged to him instead of his brother,' said Isidora..



Lucius was playing *latrunculi** with his sister when Quin came home. Their mother jumped up and went to him.

'You're hurt again,' she exclaimed, seeing him wince as she touched him. 'I'm so glad you're allowed to sleep at home.'

'There are some benefits to being an *auctoratus*,' Quin said. He sounded tired, and he wouldn't meet Lucius's eye.

'A what?' asked Valeria.

'A volunteer gladiator,' said Lucius, standing up.

'Where are you going?' Valeria demanded. 'We haven't finished the game.'

'I have,' said Lucius. 'You won.'

* *latrunculi*: a popular Roman board game. Its name means 'highwaymen'.

He went into the room that he shared with Quin. He had only been allowed to bring what he could carry from the villa. He had the Pliny scroll with his father's message in it, a few other books, and a small box with things he had kept from his childhood. But Quin's side of the room was bare; he had brought nothing with him.

Lucius picked up the Pliny and sat on the end of his bed, but he didn't open it. He just stared at the label, remembering his father handing the scroll to him.

'Lucius?'

His brother came into the room and sat down on his bed opposite.

'We never used to argue, did we?' he said.

Lucius shook his head. He didn't trust himself to speak without his voice wobbling.

'I'm sorry,' Quin said. 'Things are bad enough without us arguing. I just don't want to think about... *him...*'

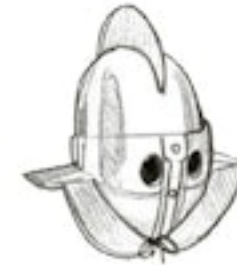
'Father?'

Quin clenched his fists and his whole body tensed. Then he relaxed.

'Even that word makes the anger come back,' he said. 'You know, Crassus told me to think about something that makes me angry when I fight. So...'

'You think about Father,' said Lucius.

CHAPTER III



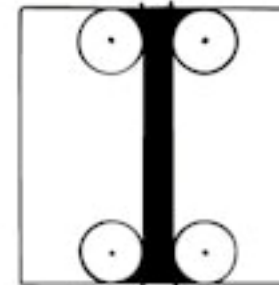
‘So, what happened to your father?’ Isidora asked, between spoonfuls of onion soup. ‘He was a senator, wasn’t he?’

They had been cleaning the barracks all morning. It was not a pleasant job. Lucius didn’t know which he hated cleaning most – the filthy dormitories that the novicii gladiators shared or the stinking private rooms of the trained gladiators.

At last they had finished and had found something to eat from the kitchen. Lucius took a spoonful of his soup and grimaced. It wasn’t the kind of onion soup that he was used to. This tasted like ditchwater.

‘He was the best senator,’ he said. ‘A good man.’

CHAPTER XIII



It was the fly that brought Lucius to his senses again.

He didn't know how long he had been standing in the middle of the dormitory. His whole body felt heavy and immovable. It was as if someone had cast a spell and turned him into a statue. He felt the fly land on his cheek, but couldn't seem to raise his hand to brush it away. It crawled onto his nose, and he felt himself go cross-eyed as he tried to look at it. He laughed, and the spell was broken.

Still laughing, he opened his clenched palm and looked at the ring. It was shining like a promise. He slipped it onto his forefinger; it was only a little bit loose. Then he picked up the twisted twig broom and

began sweeping the floor, gathering up the dirt with the cleaning sawdust. Tonight! He would breathe the same air as his father; he would learn why he had done such a desperate thing as to run away.

When the floor was clean and he'd scooped all the dirt and sawdust into the bucket, Lucius left the dormitory and walked out into the covered walkway. The arena was empty – even the gladiators who weren't fighting that day must have gone to see the spectacle. Lucius put down the bucket and broom, and walked out into the middle of the arena.

The midday sun beat down on his head and made him screw up his eyes into narrow slits. He tried to imagine how it must feel to face an opponent in this heat. It was hard enough to stand here and bear it in just his tunic. But the gladiators had to fight in heavy armour, and some of their weapons were excessively heavy. Lucius had felt the weight of the swords and shields in the armoury, and he couldn't even lift some of them. He would not last five minutes in a battle.

'Don't let Secundus see you daydreaming,' called Isidora's voice. 'He'll have you scrubbing the fountains if he thinks you like the sun that much.'

Lucius whirled around, trying to see her. The light was so bright that everything around the edge of the arena was a blur of shadow.

'I'm over here,' she said, laughing and picking up his broom and bucket. 'Did you leave these for someone to trip over?'

'Isidora, I've got amazing news!' he said, hurrying over to her.

He was so eager to tell her everything that the words spilled out of his mouth, tumbling over each other. She frowned, struggling to follow the chain of events.

'Wait, wait!' she said, holding up a hand. 'Come into the armoury – we'll be out of sight there.'

They dashed into the cool, half-empty armoury, and Lucius sat down on a bench and leaned back, feeling like an emperor.

'Start again, from the beginning,' Isidora said, standing in front of him with her arms folded across her chest. 'And for goodness' sake don't talk so fast. You found another message?'

'It was in my bag, just like the first one,' he said. 'It was definitely my father's handwriting, and it said to meet him last night and to tell no one.'

'And it was put into your bag *inside* the school?' she asked. 'It *must* be one of the slaves.'

'Stop interrupting,' Lucius replied. 'I'll explain everything. I went to the meeting place but there was no one there – I waited around for ages. I didn't know what to think – I was going to talk to you about it as soon as I got a chance today. But everything was so busy this morning, getting ready for the spectacle. And then Secundus sent me to clean the dormitories.'

Isidora gave a little start, but said nothing.

'Then Rufus came in. At first I thought he was

going to attack me, but he showed me this.'

He held out his forefinger. Isidora stared down at the ring, and then looked back up at him.

'I don't understand.'

'This ring belongs to my father,' he told her. 'Rufus is his slave. He sent him here to watch over me and Quin, and to find out if we believed the stories about him being a traitor.'

She was not looking as excited as he had hoped.

'Lucius, this sounds really far-fetched,' she said. 'Why would your father make his slave become a gladiator? Why not just send him to see you at home?'

'Because Quin is never there,' Lucius snapped at her, annoyed that she was questioning him. 'He needed to know if he could trust us – me. There's proof of his innocence and he's going to tell me where to find it.'

'Just slow down a second—'

'Isidora, trust me!' he shouted. 'I *know* this is true!'

'And last week you *knew* Rufus was not to be trusted.'

'Look, I didn't believe it either at first,' Lucius said, reminding himself that he had been just as suspicious. 'But the place where Father asked to meet me was somewhere no one else would have known about. I mean, no one else would have known it was a place we explored together.'

'So why didn't he meet you, if you're so sure it

was him?'

'Because it was a test,' he explained. 'They had to be certain that I wasn't going to turn up with a horde of soldiers to arrest him.'

'So now they trust you?'

'Exactly!' he said with triumph. 'After his battle, Rufus is going to take me to my father, and I'm going to find out where this proof is, and then everything is going to go back to how it was, and Quin won't have to fight tomorrow.'

Isidora frowned. 'But where *is* your father? What if Rufus gets hurt in the battle and can't take you?'

'That's another thing,' said Lucius. 'You know that wax tablet we found in the room underground? I don't understand it, but Rufus says that the money is something to do with the matches. Ravilla and Crassus are fixing the outcomes – they know who's going to win before the battle has even begun.'

Isidora had gone very pale. 'But that's wrong,' she said. 'It must be illegal – completely illegal.'

'When Father's back he'll sort the whole thing out,' said Lucius, glad that he didn't have to worry about it any more.

But Isidora's eyes seemed to be getting bigger and bigger.

'Lucius, where were you when Rufus was telling you all this?' she asked. 'Quick!'

'I told you – I was in the dormitory.'

'When – how long ago?'

'Half an hour – an hour – I don't know.' The urgency in her voice was making him feel uneasy again. 'Why?'

'Just before the gladiators left for the amphitheatre?'

'I don't know – probably,' he said. 'Yes.'

'I'm an idiot!' Isidora groaned. 'Why didn't I tell you straight away?'

'Tell me what?'

'Lucius, I saw your uncle standing outside the dormitories for ages before the gladiators left,' she said. 'He looked as if he was listening to something. I thought that maybe he was checking that you were working – I didn't know he might be listening to something like this!'

'He knows that my father is somewhere close by,' Lucius groaned. 'He'll have Rufus arrested – what am I going to do?'

'It's ten times worse than that,' said Isidora. 'Don't you see? Rufus has given away his secret – he told you about the match fixing and now he's planning to escape. Ravilla won't let him go, and if I know him he'll want revenge.'

'He can't risk Rufus telling anyone else about it,' added Lucius.

'I'm getting a horrible feeling about this,' said Isidora, her voice wavering. 'There's something really wrong happening here.'

Lucius stood up so fast that he made her jump.

'Rufus needs to know that Ravilla heard our

conversation,' he said. 'It might change his mind about losing. Ravilla's the sponsor – he makes the final decision – and if he really does want revenge on Rufus...'

'Lucius, what are you going to do?' she asked.

'Run!' he said. .



Lucius sprinted out of the school, hearing the thump of Isidora's steps close behind him. They would both be in serious trouble for abandoning their duties, but he couldn't worry about that right now. The temporary amphitheatre was only five minutes away – two minutes if they ran fast.

'Move!' he yelled at the backs of people who hadn't heard his footsteps behind them.

Bags and baskets fell to the ground as he dodged past people in a wild, headlong rush. Angry voices called after him and he heard Isidora calling out apologies, but all he cared about was stopping Rufus from fighting.

Lucius reached the amphitheatre first and hurled himself through the first entrance he saw. Suddenly something hit his ankle and he found himself sprawling on the ground, spitting sawdust out of his mouth. A very solid-looking man was standing over him, tapping the foot that he had just used to trip Lucius up.

'Tickets,' he grunted, folding his arms. 'Ever heard

of them?’

‘We don’t need tickets, we’re with the school,’ Lucius panted, pulling himself to his feet. Blood started to trickle down his leg – he must have landed on a stone. He heard the roar of the crowd inside the amphitheatre and felt sick with dread – had the fights begun?

‘We?’ repeated the man. ‘Think you’re twins, do you?’

At that moment Isidora caught up with him, wheezing and red in the face.

‘Please let us in,’ Lucius begged. ‘We need to speak to one of the gladiators urgently.’

The man’s chest swelled with importance. He pointed up to the archway above the entrance.

‘See that?’ he asked, pointing to the number that was painted there. ‘Know what that is?’

‘I just want to—’

‘That number shows which seats this entrance leads to,’ the man said. ‘Seats that have been paid for. Seats that have tickets.’

‘We’re not going to sit in any of the cursed seats!’ Lucius yelled. ‘Do we look like we’re here to enjoy ourselves?’

‘Slaves can’t use this entrance,’ the man replied. ‘Your entrance is round the side. And I don’t appreciate being sworn at. I’m only doing my job.’

‘Look, we just need to get to the corridors, or wherever the gladiators are dressing,’ Isidora explained. ‘Couldn’t you just let us slip through?’

‘Not through here,’ said the man. ‘More than my life’s worth. Only citizens through this gate, that’s my orders.’

‘This is an emergency,’ Lucius said through gritted teeth.

‘I can’t help that,’ he replied. ‘Not my problem.’

‘Can’t you make an exception, please?’ begged Isidora.

The man’s pink, shiny lower lip jutted out and he shook his head.

‘If I made an exception for you, every slave in the city would think they could slip in this way,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to be smarter than that to get past me!’

Letting out an explosive roar of frustration, Lucius pelted along the side of the amphitheatre, passing three more citizens’ entrances until he saw Posca standing beside an unmarked entrance arch.

‘Have they started?’ he asked him as he shot past.

‘Yes, of course,’ he heard Posca exclaim in surprise. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Wait for me!’ called Isidora.

Lucius sprinted along the entranceway, and the clamour of the crowd seemed to get ten times as loud. At the end of the entranceway his path was blocked. There were, of course, no underground areas here, so the corridor was packed with cages, technical equipment and armour. He could hear the clash of weapons but he couldn’t see who was in the arena. Isidora slammed into his back.

'Who's fighting?' she yelled in his ear.

'Don't know,' he shouted back. 'Got to get around this cage!'

Whatever beast had been in the cage that morning, it had obviously met its end in the arena, because the door was swinging open. Lucius squeezed through the narrow gap between the cage and the stalls, then tripped over a shield and sprawled on the ground for the second time in five minutes. Behind him, Isidora groaned. He looked up and saw Rufus bringing his sword crashing down onto Pulcher's small shield. They were too late.

Lucius rose to his feet and darted forwards to enter the arena, but Isidora grabbed the back of his tunic. She dragged him back and held on to his arm so tightly that he felt her stubby nails digging into his skin.

'Let me go!' he yelled. 'I have to stop the match!'

'Lucius, there's nothing you can do,' she said, looking frightened. 'The attendants would grab you before you got anywhere near him.'

'But he's got to know!' The words seemed to tear at his throat. 'We've got to shout to him – tell him!'

'How will he hear us over that?' Isidora asked, waving her free arm towards the stalls that surrounded them.

The shouts and cheers were deafening. Rufus's name was being chanted from twenty different directions at once.

'And even if we did make him hear us,' she went on, 'distracting him like that would only give Pulcher the chance to kill him.'

His head was throbbing, and tears pricked his eyes. The fire that had burned inside him a moment before had gone, and his body ached. Isidora's hand wasn't restraining him any more – it was holding him up.

'There has to be something we can do,' he said. 'There *has* to be.'

He remembered the loyalty in Rufus's eyes when he had talked about Aquila, and his stomach knotted into a spasm. This man was the only other person who believed in his father.

'I have to stop this!' he rasped. 'My father would find a way!'

'Your father was a senator,' Isidora told him. 'You're a slave. No one will let you speak.'

Her voice sounded thick and strange. When Lucius looked up at her, he saw that she was crying – she was giving in. *I'm not going to just sit here crying!* he thought. A desperate idea flashed into his mind.

'I might be a slave, but Ravilla is still my uncle,' he said. 'If I can just get to him, I can tell him that I know everything – I can threaten to tell the whole city about his cheating.'

'Blackmail?' Isidora looked shocked.

'It's the only power I've got!' he yelled at her.

She stared at him and then shoved him towards the stalls.

'He's halfway around the arena,' she said, pointing into the distance at Ravilla's seat of honour. 'Run, Lucius!'

Lucius scrambled up the steps, tripping over legs and bags, hardly feeling the blows that landed on his back. He reached the first tier's walkway and stumbled along it as fast as he could, trying to keep one eye on the gladiators as he went. It looked as if he had a little time. Pulcher was a good match for Rufus. They were both tall, and they had the same animal-like liteness.

Pulcher was using his spear to keep his opponent at bay, trying to stop the angled sword from jabbing around his shield. As Rufus turned to avoid the spear, Pulcher charged at him and slammed his round shield into the Thracian's side. Rufus crashed to the ground and Pulcher drew his sword, holding it diagonally in front of him.

Lucius looked towards his uncle again to make sure that he was heading in the right direction. He didn't seem to be any closer at all. He clambered past a group of young men, who gave him a shove that knocked him down once more. His knees were smeared with blood.

Pulling himself up, he carried on and glanced down at the arena. Rufus was on his feet again, and charging at Pulcher before the Hoplomachus could raise his spear. Their shields clashed with a resounding smash that echoed above the shouts of the crowd. This time

Pulcher was thrown backwards, sliding helplessly across the sand. Rufus thundered towards him, his sword thrusting downwards, but it met Pulcher's shield as he launched himself upwards.

'Just keep blocking, keep him away from you,' said Lucius under his breath, willing Rufus to somehow get the message.

He was getting nearer – he could see his uncle's face clearly now. Below, Rufus was parrying Pulcher's attacks, but he wasn't fighting with the skill that Lucius had seen in training. He knew that he had to lose. The crowd was on Pulcher's side – they could see that he was pouring passion and spirit into his battle. Lucius wondered if he had also been told that the match was fixed.

'Fighting by the book!' shouted one man as Lucius scrambled past. 'Get back to training school!'

'Shame!' yelled another.

Lucius reached the steps that would lead him up to the next tier, but his legs wouldn't obey his command to run. He had to clamber up on his hands and knees like a child, his back to the arena. He wondered if Isidora was watching him – he thought he could feel her gaze.

There was a deafening roar and the crowd around him rose to their feet, punching the air, whooping and cheering.

'No, no, no,' said Lucius, turning around in dread.

Rufus was face down at the far edge of the arena – Pulcher had obviously sent him flying and knocked him

out. His sword and shield lay on the sand between them.

Pulcher marched across the arena to his opponent as the familiar chant rose around Lucius: 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' Rufus rose onto all fours, shaking his head. His left arm was shining red with blood. He looked up as Pulcher reached his side, and then put his left hand on the Hoplomachus's thigh. From where he was standing, halfway up the steps, Lucius could see the bloody handprint it made.

He was too far away from his uncle – even if he had screamed what he knew at the top of his voice, Ravilla wouldn't have heard a word.

'Kill! Kill! Kill!' chanted the crowd.

Lucius saw his uncle gaze around the arena at the sea of outstretched hands, which all had the thumbs pointing out to the side – the sign for death.

Ravilla stood up and the chanting diminished. The verdict was about to be made.

'Spare him,' Lucius whispered. 'Spare him. Keep your word.'

He wished he could see the expression in his uncle's eyes. Ravilla seemed to be enjoying the moment and drawing it out. The crowd was silent, apart from a few isolated shouts of 'Death!' and 'Kill him!' Just when Lucius thought he couldn't bear it any longer, Ravilla raised his arm and held out his hand... with his thumb jabbing out to the side like a curved blade. Death!

'No!' Lucius shouted.

But the crowd's mass bellow of triumph blanketed his voice. He ran down the steps, not caring if he fell, not knowing what he planned to do. But before Lucius had even reached the bottom, Pulcher had thrust his sword into Rufus's neck..



'I can't believe he did it,' said Lucius.

'Can't you?' asked Isidora. 'I can.'

They were sitting against the outside wall of the amphitheatre, staring straight ahead. Lucius felt numb with shock and exhaustion. He had stumbled out of the amphitheatre by the first exit he reached, and somehow Isidora had found him.

'We can't stay here,' she said. 'We have to go back to the school before we're missed.'

'What's the point?'

'Lucius?' She turned to look at him, but he didn't move his head. He understood now why his mother just sat on her couch, staring at nothing. If he kept very still and very quiet, perhaps the numbness would never go away, and he would never have to think about all the things that had just gone wrong.

'Lucius, please,' said Isidora shakily. 'You're scaring me.'

'Go, then, if you want to go,' he replied. 'I'm not stopping you.'

'I'm not leaving you here. You can't just let him win.'

'Why not?'

He was speaking in a monotone and he knew it sounded strange, but there was something effortless about it too. At this moment, he didn't have any more effort to give.

'Because if someone doesn't do something to stop him, he'll just go on and on ruining lives,' she said with venom.

'Why bother?'

He half-hoped that she would give him a strong, solid answer, but none came. Her silence lasted so unusually long that he moved his head to look at her. She had turned her face away.

'Isidora?' he said to the glossy back of her head.

'There were so many secrets in his household that I lost track of what I was supposed to know and what I was supposed to forget,' she said. 'I heard my parents talking about one of the visitors who came to the villa in the middle of the night, and they mentioned a name.'

She drew a deep breath and her shoulders shook a little.

'I was just a stupid child,' she said. 'I didn't know what I was doing. I mentioned the name in front of him, and he questioned me. I told him that I had heard my parents say it.'

Lucius didn't know what to say, but something told him to reach out his hand. She took it in hers and squeezed it hard.

'Have you ever seen a slave scourged?' she asked. 'I don't suppose you have. It doesn't sound as if your father would use punishments like that.'

'No,' said Lucius, feeling sick.

'They use a whip with metal pieces tied to the ends,' she said. 'The metal rips the slave's back to the bone. He had them both scourged first.'

Lucius shuddered and she squeezed his hand more tightly.

'Then he had them crucified,' she said. 'It took my mother three days to die. My father lasted even longer.'

'Isidora...'

'I never even got to say goodbye.' She was trying so hard not to sob that the bones in his hand were half crushed. 'He locked me up until they were dead and thrown away like rubbish. Then he had me brought to him, and he told me what he had done. He warned me to remember what happens to slaves who betray their masters. Then he told me that he was going to show me mercy. He refused to have me in his villa any more, but he sent me to work in the school.'

Horried, Lucius held her hand in silence. There was nothing to say. He had heard stories of people mistreating their slaves, of course, and he had agreed with his father that masters should treat their slaves well. But now that he and Isidora were friends, he knew that he had never truly thought of slaves as real people before. The way Isidora felt about her parents'

deaths wasn't somehow less painful because she was a slave. It was no different from how he would feel if his parents were destroyed in such a monstrous way.

He watched her struggling to get control over herself. Her shoulders shook and her hand still squeezed his, but when she turned to face him she had dry eyes.

'I decided that I would never show him how he had made me feel,' she said. 'But that if I ever got the chance to take revenge on him, I would. Well, I think that perhaps this might be that time. So please don't ask me "What's the point?" All right?'

Without letting go of her hand, Lucius stood up and looked down at her. The numbness had gone, and he was ready to do something. It felt better than giving in.

'Come on,' he said. 'Let's go back to the school. I need to look inside Rufus's bag before the other gladiators come back.'



In the dormitory, Lucius and Isidora tipped Rufus's bag upside down. There wasn't much inside.

'A key, a tunic and a pair of sandals,' said Isidora. 'It could be the key to where your father is staying.'

'That's not much use without the address,' Lucius replied.

He placed the key inside the sandals and put them

carefully back into the bag. Then he folded the tunic as neatly as he could. It seemed like the least he could do, but as he was folding it, he felt something hard.

'There's something inside the tunic,' he exclaimed, shaking it out. A wax tablet fell to the ground. For a moment, Lucius just stared down at it. It was more than he had dared to hope he would find. But would it tell him where his father was hiding?

He picked up the tablet.

My dear Lucius,

If you are reading this, you will already know that Rufus is your loyal friend. I am sorry that you have been kept in the dark for so long. There seems to be so much evidence against me that I did not dare to assume that you would not believe it. I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me.

There is so much that I want to say to you, but that can wait until we are face to face again. With your help, I am confident that we can find the proof of my innocence.

Rufus will bring you to meet me tonight, and I will explain the little plan that we have devised.

The hours will go slowly until this evening.

Quintus Valerius Aquila

Lucius felt as if he had walked into a stone wall.

'Nothing,' he said, passing the tablet to Isidora. 'No meeting place, no address, not even a hint of where he might be.'

'It's so clear that he's innocent,' said Isidora, reading the message. 'Why don't you show it to your brother? Surely he'll listen now?'

'Isidora, if I showed this to Quin he would take it straight to Ravilla. And I'm not sure that Father would want that to happen. After all, he isn't writing to *him*, is he? And Rufus as good as warned me against him.'

'What are you going to do?' Isidora asked, handing the tablet back to him. 'Don't forget, Ravilla must have overheard your conversation, so he knows that Rufus told you about the match fixing. You could be in danger yourself. You know he's coming back here after the spectacle tonight? I heard him say so.'

Lucius gritted his teeth. It was so unfair. Somewhere outside this vast city, his father was waiting for him. Somewhere there was proof of his innocence. Suddenly he realised something.

'If he overheard that conversation, he also knows that Rufus worked for my father,' he said, astonished that he hadn't thought of it before. 'He knowingly put his brother's slave to death!'

'And he knows that your father is nearby,' Isidora added. 'I thought that he was trying to find his brother, not keep you away from him.'

'*Why* did he do it?' Lucius asked. 'Why order the

death of such a skilled gladiator?'

'Like Rufus told you,' said Isidora, 'there's bound to be money in it somewhere.'

The whole situation seemed more complicated by the minute. Lucius felt muddle-headed and confused.

'The thing is, I don't really have many choices,' he said eventually. 'It's no use going to Quin. I have no idea how to make contact with my father, and I can't tell the authorities, or Mother, or anyone that I would normally trust.'

'So what are you going to do?'

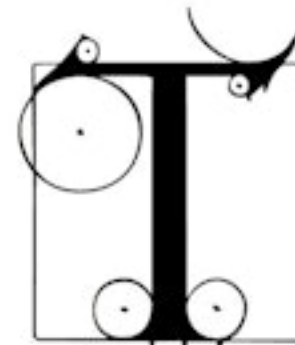
'I'm going to ask for an explanation,' said Lucius simply. 'I'm going to talk to my uncle.'



PART THREE

VETERANUS

CHAPTER XIV



he mess hall was ready, the barley gruel and boiled sheep's head were prepared and the slaves were waiting.

The sky was getting darker by the second – surely the spectacle would have finished by now? Surely the gladiators must be on their way back with Crassus and Ravilla?

But still the sky darkened, and still they didn't come. It was all very well boldly deciding to confront his uncle in the heat of the moment, but the waiting around was making Lucius's courage go distinctly off the boil.

Besides, he kept thinking about his father and imagining him waiting eagerly for Rufus and Lucius to arrive. He would wait... and wait... and wait... and no one would come. It was a miserable thought.

Eventually he went into a room beside Ravilla's study. Isidora had once shown him a crack in the wall through which conversations could be heard. He thought about the day she had taken him to the public bath-house to listen to Crassus and his uncle talking. That was the first time he had realised how well Ravilla could lie.

Lucius walked around the room and then pressed his hand against the wall it shared with the study. The darkness deepened, and the room around him faded into shadow, but he felt downwards until he came to the tiny crack.

He suddenly became aware of laughter and loud voices. The gladiators were returning, and in that instant Lucius knew exactly what he was going to do. He lay down flat beside the wall and pressed his ear against it. The voices of the gladiators grew muffled as they went into the mess hall, and then he heard someone entering the room next door.

'A success,' Ravilla said. 'And tomorrow will be even better – the Emperor will be there. And he's recalled all the patricians from their summer homes and country estates.'

'A success?' Crassus repeated, his deep voice vibrating in the wall. 'I lost the best fighter I've had in years – and I lost my bet. What's successful about that? I hope you know you'll be paying for it.'

'Stop bleating,' said Ravilla. 'You won every other bet we agreed. You haven't made a loss.'

'You owe me and you know it.'

There was a long silence, broken only by an occasional chink. It sounded like coins dropping onto coins. Eventually Crassus spoke again, sounding much more friendly.

'So are you going to tell me *why*?'

'Too much curiosity can be a dangerous thing,' said Ravilla.

Things were beginning to fall into place at last. Crassus and his uncle were somehow managing to place bets on their own gladiators, and then they were ordering them whether to win or lose. The gladiators had to obey – their blood oath demanded absolute obedience.

The next silence was so long that Lucius thought Crassus must have left the room. But then he heard the glug of wine, and realised that they were celebrating. He thought of Rufus's body being dragged away to the *spoliarium** and wished that he had the strength – not to mention the bravery – to march into the next room and punch his uncle's sly face.

'Are you still sure about the lists for tomorrow?' Crassus asked. 'I'm talking about—'

'I know who you mean, and nothing has changed,' barked Ravilla. 'Not so many, of course – we don't want the Emperor to complain that our men are fighting by the book. But enough to make a little profit.'

* *spoliarium*: the room where dead fighters were stripped of their armour.

'He's got a lot of potential,' said Crassus. 'I didn't mind so much when I thought we'd still have Rufus. But now... he could be a real crowd-pleaser, you know. Good-looking lad. His mother won't thank you.'

'My sister-in-law is slowly but surely losing her grip on sanity,' Ravilla sneered. 'She probably won't even notice he's gone.'

Lucius felt as if something cold was trickling around his innards. Surely he must have misheard?

'We'll make it a good one at least,' said Crassus. 'Lots of flair and content – lots of style.'

'Plan whatever you like,' Ravilla replied. 'As long as Quintus is on his knees at the end of it all.'

Lucius clamped his hand over his own mouth, not trusting himself to be silent. His eyes stared blindly into the darkness as he wondered if his ears had deceived him. Could Ravilla really be sitting on the other side of the wall, calmly plotting Quin's death?

He heard Crassus say goodnight, and he rolled sideways until he could see out through the doorway. He watched the Doctor Retiariorum cross the arena and climb the steps to his quarters. Ravilla was alone.

Lucius stood up and made himself walk to the door. If he didn't do this now, he never would. He counted the steps to the door of Ravilla's study and paused in the entrance.

His uncle didn't see him at first. He was leaning back in his chair, his eyes closed. There was a cup of wine in his hand and a small lucerna on the table.

Lucius wondered if it was the one he and Isidora had used underground.

He kept still, and at length Ravilla opened his eyes. He jumped so violently when he saw Lucius that some of the wine sloshed onto the table.

'I didn't think you'd still be here,' he said. 'You startled me.'

Lucius didn't know what to say to this, and Ravilla's eyes flicked rapidly from side to side.

'Did you want something?'

With a flash of insight for which he thanked the gods, Lucius realised that Ravilla was afraid of him – afraid of the knowledge he might possess. He decided to reveal only what he had to.

'I know your secret,' he said.

Ravilla went scarlet. He stammered: 'I'm not sure I understand your meaning, Lucius.'

'I think you do.'

They stared at each other, and then Ravilla seemed to relax slightly. He waved his hand towards a chair.

'Please, take a seat.'

'I'd rather stand up.'

He had meant to sound grown-up, but it came out sounding petulant. A little smile played around Ravilla's mouth and he put down his wine.

'As you prefer,' he said. 'Now, you think that you know some sort of secret, is that it?'

Lucius stepped into the room on impulse, and then wished he hadn't. He glanced around at the door.

'There's no one listening, if that's what you're worried about,' said Ravilla, curling his lip.

'You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?' said Lucius, unable to help himself. Of course, that gave the game away. Ravilla's smile grew wolfish.

'Ah, I see. Rufus. Well, well.'

He pressed the tips of his fingers together and gazed up at Lucius.

'What exactly do you think you know, nephew?'

'You've been making illegal bets,' said Lucius. 'You've been fixing the games so that you win.'

Ravilla's fingertips parted again and he spread his hands outwards in a gesture of honest astonishment.

'A harmless deceit,' he said. 'Believe me, everyone cheats in one way or another.'

'No they don't,' retorted Lucius. 'And there's nothing harmless about it. Rufus wasn't supposed to die today, and I heard you just now, planning Quin's death.'

'A little joke between Crassus and me,' Ravilla said, picking up his wine and taking a sip. 'Of course Quin will not die tomorrow.'

'I'm going to tell the whole city about what you're doing here!' Lucius yelled.

'Oh, I don't think that's a very good idea, Lucius.' Ravilla's voice was so soft that Lucius had to strain to hear him. 'You see, I am only in this position because of your father.'

'My father would never tell you to cheat,' Lucius snapped.

'No, no, my dear brother was above anything so *earthly*,' said Ravilla. 'His crimes were far more intellectual. But when he needed to leave the city, who did he come running to for help? Mmm?'

'Are you saying you helped him escape?' Lucius asked in bewilderment.

'My dear boy, I spent every spare penny I had on getting your father safely out of this city and looking after you and your family,' said Ravilla. 'That's why I have had to be, shall we say, "creative" about finding new sources of income.'

'If that's true, then why didn't Rufus mention it?' Lucius demanded.

'Ah yes, Rufus,' said Ravilla. 'I wondered when we'd get around to him.'

He drew in a long breath through his nose, which flared white at the nostrils.

'Yes, I heard what he said to you this morning,' he went on. 'I was worried that you were being deceived, so, concerned for your safety, I eavesdropped. And, as I suspected, he told you a pack of lies. Aquila isn't anywhere near Rome. He is far away somewhere by now, wallowing in regret for his actions.'

'But—'

'Rufus was trying to trick you,' Ravilla said. 'It was a nasty, vindictive slave's trick, that's all. I got your father out of Rome. If you want to report me for that, go ahead. I'll be arrested, of course, and I will probably have to sell my property. I expect you'll be

able to live here at the school, but your mother and Valeria may not be so lucky...'

Lucius was revolted. He stepped forward, placed his hands on the table and leaned in close to his uncle's smirking face.

'I don't believe a single word,' he said. 'I'm going to tell everyone the truth about you, including Quin. I don't care what oaths he made. He's not going to fight to earn you money!'

Even this didn't wipe the smug look from Ravilla's face.

'Lucius, I strongly advise you to learn the rules of a game before you begin to play,' he said. 'Quin signed his blood oath to the school – not to me. If he refuses to fight for any reason, he has already agreed to endure “branding, chains, flogging or death by the sword”. The same will be true even if you have reported my little offence.'

Lucius sank into the chair. His uncle was right – he could do nothing to release Quin from his oath.

'However...' Ravilla went on.

Lucius looked up. His uncle's eyes were as sharp as knives, and he chose his words with great care, sounding some of them out slowly as if they were ripe fruits bursting in his mouth.

'Although it is not possible to remove Quin from the battle order altogether,' he said, 'I *may* be able to persuade Crassus to let him fight without a pre-planned outcome.' He let the words hang in the air before

continuing. 'Of course, I would need to have *time* and *attention* to devote to such a difficult conversation. It would be impossible if I were *distracted*, for example, by worries about *legal* issues.'

It was blackmail, pure and simple. But Lucius understood that he was being offered his brother's life. He couldn't refuse.

'Do we have an understanding?' Ravilla asked.

Lucius swallowed hard. He had to keep his nerve.

'If you promise me that you will stop fixing the matches – *completely* stop,' he said, 'I will not say anything about what you and Crassus have done in the past.'

Ravilla pushed back his chair, stood up and gave Lucius a long, long look. Then he held out his hand. Lucius did the same, gripping his forearm. The touch of Ravilla's fingers on his own arm made his skin crawl. But Ravilla was smiling again.

'It is agreed,' he said.

END OF BOOK I

FOLLOW LUCIUS'S FURTHER ADVENTURES IN:

GLADIATOR SCHOOL II
**BLOOD
AND FIRE**



‘**G**ames given by Gaius Valerius Ravilla,’ Lucius read aloud. ‘Forty gladiators will fight. Perfumed water will be scattered.’ His finger hovered over his brother’s name. ‘Quintus, Retiarius, tiro, will battle Burbo, Secutor. Has won ten bouts.’

‘You’ve read it at least twenty times,’ said Isidora, sounding rather impatient. ‘You can’t change the words by staring at them, you know.’

Lucius dropped the programme back into his bag and rubbed his eyes. He hadn’t had much sleep.

‘He should be battling another tiro, not a veteranus with ten palms,’ he said.

‘It shows how talented he is, that they’ve matched

him with someone like that,' Isidora said. 'Thanks to you he has a good chance – now you have to leave the rest up to him.'

Lucius knew that she was right, but it was easier said than done.

They had squeezed themselves into the hot corridor among the cages again, this time with permission to watch a couple of matches before going back to the school. It was obvious from the arena floor that there had already been several gory fights, and the crowd's lust for death was growing. The air was rank with sweat and blood.

Lucius looked across the amphitheatre at the Emperor Titus, who was leaning back and laughing with Ravilla. He wondered if Titus knew that one of the gladiators he was about to watch was the sponsor's nephew.

Quin and his opponent, Burbo, were already in the arena doing their warm-up exercises. Burbo had a few supporters calling his name, but the crowd loved an underdog and there were just as many people shouting Quin's name and wishing him luck.

There was a hush as the musicians signalled the start of the battle, and then a sense of anticipation as Quin circled around the heavily armoured Secutor, feinting with his net. Burbo raised his sword and Quin jabbed at his leg with the trident. Burbo deflected it with his shield and sprang towards Quin, who darted backwards. There was a roar of approval from the

crowd – it was a good start.

Circling again, Quin shook his net playfully across the sand, taunting his opponent. Burbo charged at him but he sprang aside, casting the net as he leapt. The Secutor avoided the net and charged at Quin again, but Quin could run faster than anyone Lucius knew.

He breathed a sigh of temporary relief as the heavily armoured Secutor chased his brother around the arena. Burbo had no chance of catching him. Quin's advantage was speed and lightness – Burbo would tire out far more quickly.

After several minutes, Quin drew nearer to Burbo again, staying at trident's length. He started to circle him faster and faster, making Burbo turn on the spot to keep him in sight.

'He's trying to make him dizzy,' said Lucius, clenching his fists. 'Come on, Quin, faster!'

As if they had heard him, the crowd took up the chant – 'Faster! Faster!'

Quin threw his net and lunged with his trident at the same time. But Burbo's experience showed and he avoided them both, slashing at Quin's back with his gladius. Quin arched quickly away from him, but not quite quickly enough. The gladius drew a long, shallow cut across his back and bright-red blood trickled down. The crowd howled in delight.

'First blood to Burbo!' they yelled. 'Come on, Burbo!'

Lucius could tell from the way his brother's chin

jerked upwards that Quin was annoyed to have been the first to be cut.

'Keep your temper,' he muttered under his breath. 'Stay focused.'

Quin slammed his trident into Burbo's leg so fast and hard that the Secutor went down with an almighty crash. The crowd erupted, but Burbo was on his feet again in an instant – the greave on his leg had protected him.

He stamped on the net that was lying on the sand and slashed at it with his gladius. Quin jerked the net from under Burbo's foot and sent him crashing to the ground, but he rolled sideways and scrambled to his feet again, hurling himself after Quin.

The battle ranged across the full breadth of the arena, giving everyone a chance to see the gladiators up close. When they neared the corridor where Lucius was squatting, he saw that they were both sweating and bleeding freely, but neither of them had a serious wound. This could take a long time. Lucius felt as if the inside of his skin was turning cold, despite the stifling heat.

Quin led Burbo back into the centre of the arena, every now and then flinging his net without letting it go, forcing the Secutor to jump over it like a child's skipping rope. The crowd screamed with mocking laughter.

'Dance, chaser, dance!' they shouted.

Burbo was getting tired. The weight of his armour

was gradually making him slower, and the crowd shouted louder still, sensing weakness.

'You've got him now, Quin!'

'Don't let him rest!'

'Make him chase you again!'

'Charge him!'

They were so loud that their shouts of advice to the fighting men reverberated inside Lucius's head. Burbo seemed to have heard them too, because he suddenly charged, his gladius up, and knocked Quin's trident from his hand. Burbo gave it a kick that sent it flying across the arena. Quin turned to run after it, but before he could get away, Burbo grabbed him by the tunic and hauled him backwards. Lucius cried out as the blade of the gladius flashed down, but Quin was ready. He threw his net over Burbo's head and gave a powerful tug on the mesh. Burbo stumbled and crashed to the sand.

Quin released his net as Burbo lumbered to his feet, and then flicked it towards Burbo's legs again. This time the Secutor's jump was too slow. The net whipped around his legs, throwing him down once more.

Faster than thought, Quin rushed forward, picked up his trident and used it to knock the sword out of Burbo's hand. Burbo lunged after it, but his legs were still enmeshed. Quin stood over him, pointing the prongs of his trident at Burbo's throat.

Burbo's chest was heaving as he gasped for air and

raised the index finger of his left hand.

'He's asking for mercy!' Lucius cried.

'He's won!' shouted Isidora, jumping to her feet. 'Yes!'

Quin released Burbo from the net and the young Secutor knelt at his feet.

'Kill him!' shrieked the crowd. 'Kill him!'

'Spare him,' said Lucius, staring at his brother.

Isidora put her hand on his shoulder.

'It's the Emperor's decision today,' she said.

Please don't make him kill, Lucius thought. *Don't make him do that. Not today.*

Titus was quick to give his verdict. He stood up and held out his palm with the thumb covered. Lucius's bones seemed to turn to jelly.

'Mercy,' said Isidora. 'He must have thought that they both fought well.'

'Thank the gods,' said Lucius.

He looked at his uncle, whom he could just glimpse behind Titus's throne. Did Ravilla know that he was somewhere in the crowd, watching him? Lucius hoped so. He had a sudden surge of well-being and self-belief. Anything seemed possible.

'He's got away with it this time, but I know him now,' he said. 'I know what he is. Truth's a powerful thing. One day I'm going to expose him for the cheat he is. But first I've got to find Father and clear his name.'

Isidora didn't reply. She seemed to be deep in

thought. Quin was jogging around the arena with his first victory palm, waving to the crowd. They were screaming his name, and he looked reinvigorated. Titus was standing up, holding a metal plate that contained a pile of coins.

'Lucius, let's go,' said Isidora, tugging on his tunic.

'In a minute,' he replied. 'I want to see Quin get his prize.'

'No, listen, I've been thinking,' she said.

'It can wait for one minute!'

'Remember the wax tablet you found in the underground office?' she went on as if he hadn't spoken. 'It didn't make any sense because we didn't know what it was about, but we do now. I think we should go back down there and take it!'

'We can't just take it!' said Lucius.

'Why not?' she demanded. 'Weren't you just saying that you want to expose him as a cheat? This could be the proof you need.'

'I didn't think you were actually *listening*,' said Lucius, grinning at her despite himself. 'Besides, I gave him my word not to say anything about the match fixing as long as he stopped it straight away.'

'Oh, yes, because you can always trust Ravilla to keep his promises,' said Isidora.

She had a point. Twenty minutes later, Lucius was inside the underground office, with Isidora urging him to hurry up.

The leather boxes were still empty apart from the

wax tablet. He took it and stuffed it into his messenger bag, wishing that he didn't feel so guilty.

'It's like being at war,' he told himself aloud. 'Sometimes you have to do things you're not very proud of.'

'What did you say?' hissed Isidora from outside.

'Nothing.'

'What's taking you so long?' she asked, poking her head around the door. 'I don't like it down here.'

'It was your idea,' he said, stepping around the desk and picking up the lucerna.

'Stop!' she exclaimed. 'What's that?'

She pointed at the floor beside the desk. Lucius peered down.

'I can't see anything.'

'I'm sure there was something – it must have been the way you were holding the light. Bring it lower.'

They crouched down and Isidora gave a cry of triumph and picked up a small roll of thin lead.

'What is it?' she asked.

Lucius took it and peered at it. It was dirty and had obviously been there for some time. It was pure luck that she had seen the light fall on a small, unmarked piece of metal.

'It's a curse tablet,' he said. 'My uncle must have dropped it without realising.'

'We have those in Egypt too,' Isidora commented. 'What does it say?'

'I'm not going to read it, Isidora!'

'Well I will, then,' she said, taking it back from him. 'I'm not scared of your gods.'

She carefully unrolled the soft tablet and held it close to the lamp while she read the words aloud.

'To you, ferryman and death-bringer Charon, I invoke by your name in order that you help to hold back Aquila, to whom my mother gave birth, and turn his life to wretched darkness, shame and torment. Make him suffer and remove him from my presence, and let him meet his end in a bad way. Quickly, quickly!'

'Let me see that!' said Lucius, snatching it from her.

He read the text through three times, his thoughts whirling. Then he looked up. The flickering light was making their shadows jump on the walls.

'Have the gods helped to shame my father?' he asked. 'How can I fight against their magic?'

'Shake yourself out of it, Lucius,' said Isidora in her most sensible voice. 'There's nothing divine about what happened to your father.'

Lucius pushed past her and blundered back along the dark passageway. He didn't stop until he reached the top of the steps and could stand in the bright sunlight again.

He took several deep breaths. There was something very unpleasant about that underground room. It made him feel panicky. Even now, the damp mustiness of it seemed to be clinging to him.

He walked across to the fountain and drank. Then

he splashed water onto his face and combed it into his hair with his fingers. Isidora followed him and placed her hand on his arm.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Did I offend you?'

'No,' said Lucius. 'I just couldn't stay down there and think straight, that's all.'

'So you don't think that this was the "will of the gods"?' she asked, holding out the little lead tablet.

'No,' he said, taking it from her and looking down at it. 'All this curse proves is that my uncle wanted to get rid of my father. Maybe he managed it.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

He looked up at her and felt a surge of hope.

'Don't you see?' he asked. 'Ravilla told me that he helped Father to get away, but what if he was the one who denounced him in the first place?'

'Ravilla's capable of anything, I know that,' said Isidora. 'But I don't understand why you're looking so pleased about it.'

'Because if Ravilla was behind the denouncement, I think there's a good chance that he has the proof my father was looking for,' Lucius explained. 'Rufus said that I was the only one who could get it, and I didn't understand what he meant. But that would make sense if it's hidden in Ravilla's villa or something. I'm his family – I could get access. If I could find the proof it might not matter that I don't know where Father is.'

'That's a lot of ifs,' Isidora pointed out.

Lucius knew that she was right. Finding the proof

his father needed was not going to be an easy task. But he had just watched his brother defeat a fully armed Secutor gladiator while wearing little more than a loincloth. Today, anything seemed possible.

After the musty darkness of the underground office, the warmth of the sun seemed to give him strength. It was as if the gods were telling him that he had the power to turn his fortunes around.

'Ravilla's behind what's happened to us, I know it,' he said. 'And somewhere there is bound to be evidence of what he's done.'

Isidora stared at him, and then gave a little nod. Lucius knew that she would do all she could to help. He filled two of the fountain cups and handed one to her. Then he raised the other.

'Here's to friendship,' he said.

'To friendship,' she replied.

He lifted his chin and straightened his back. Strength and certainty were surging through him. One day he would prove his father's innocence. In the meantime, he had a friend who he could trust with his life. He had a brother who was the hero of the gladiator school. These were riches – greater riches than he had ever understood before.

Whatever the future held, Lucius was ready to face it.

TO BE CONTINUED...



Murmillo, 'the Fish Man'

Weapon: gladius

Shield: large, oval or rectangular

Helmet: enclosed, with fin-shaped crest

Armour: arm guard, greave

Opponent: Thraex or Provocator

FIGHTERS IN THE GLADIATORIAL ARENA

**Hoplomachus, 'the Hoplite
(Greek infantry) fighter'**

Weapons: spear, gladius, dagger

Shield: small, round, usually bronze

Helmet: Greek style, with crest

Armour: arm guard, thigh guard

Opponent: Murmillo or Thraex



Retiarius, 'the Net Man'

Weapons: trident, net, dagger

Shield: none

Helmet: none

Armour: arm guard, galerus
(shoulder guard)

Opponent: Secutor



Thraex, 'the Thracian'

Weapon: Thracian dagger

Shield: small, rectangular, curved like
part of a cylinder

Helmet: wide-brimmed, often
decorated

with a griffin

Armour: arm guard, thigh guard,
greaves

Opponent: Murmillo or Hoplomachus

