

# GLADIATOR SCHOOL

BOOK II



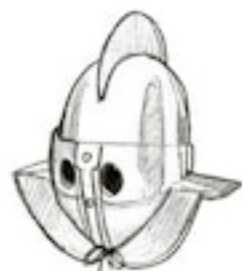
# BLOOD & FIRE

DAN SCOTT

GLADIATOR  
SCHOOL

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Mount Vesuvius

# POMPEII, AD 79

House of M.  
Nemonius Valens

Vesuvius Gate

To Rome

Schola Armatorum  
(gladiator barracks)

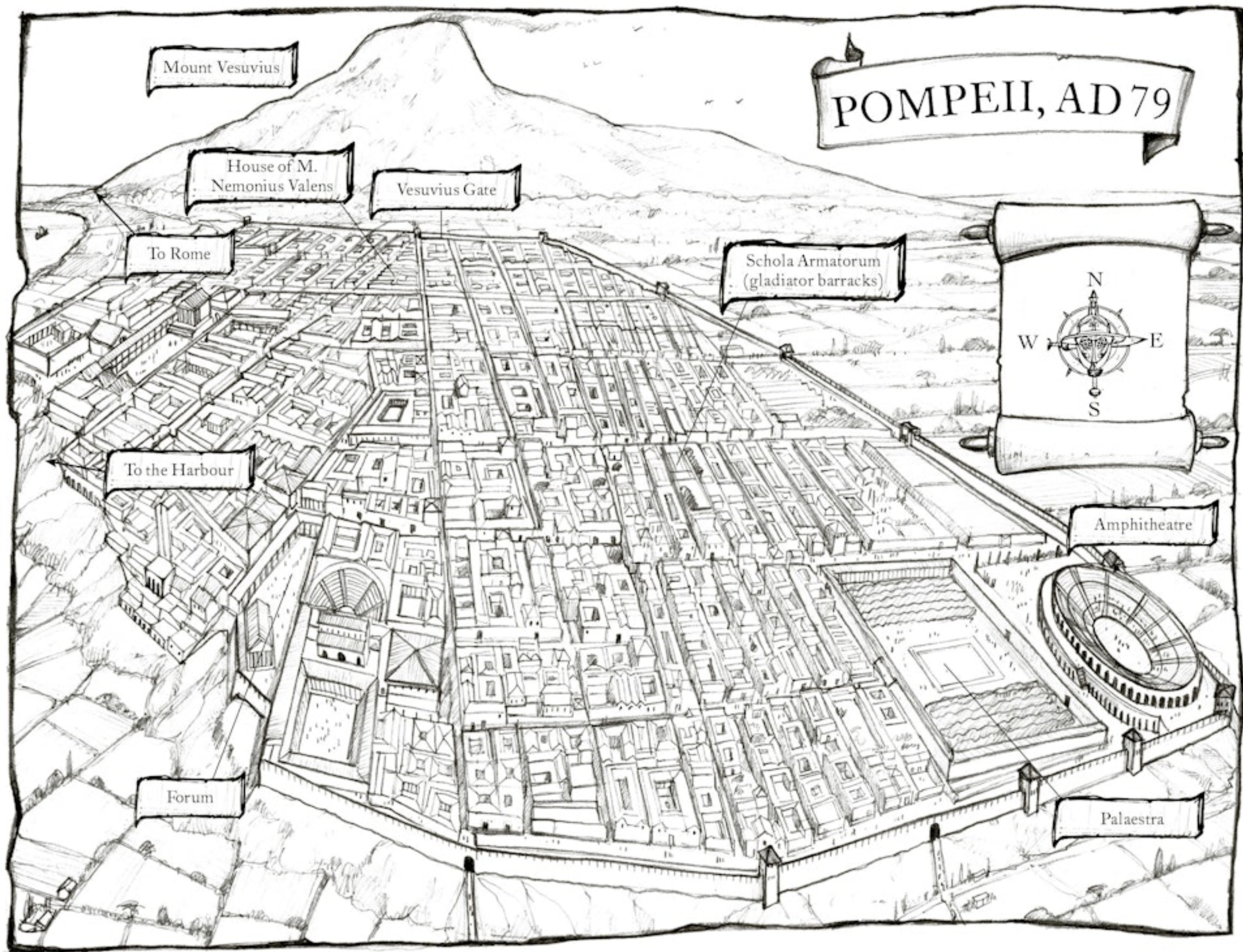
To the Harbour



Amphitheatre

Forum

Palaestra







## 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, an Egyptian slave

Crassus, a lanista (trainer of gladiators)

Valens, editor (sponsor) of the games  
at Pompeii

Atia, a seer

Eprius, a young patrician (nobleman)  
of Pompeii

## PROLOGUE

# FIRST BLOOD

ROME

*10 August AD 79*



'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.\* Burbo 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.

\* *Retiarius*: a gladiator who fights with net (*rete*) and trident; *tiro*: a gladiator fighting in public for the first time. *Secutor*: a gladiator who wears an enclosed, egg-shaped helmet and fights with a short sword (*gladius*); his name means 'Chaser'.

'He should be battling another tiro, not a veteranus\* with ten victory 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,

\* *veteranus*: a trained fighter who has survived at least one combat.

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,

\* *gladius*: short sword; the standard Roman infantry sword.



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 bronze greave on his leg had protected him.

Burbo 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.

'Quintus has 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 Lucius was watching him? He hoped so. He felt a sudden surge of well-being and self-belief. Anything seemed possible.

'Ravilla's got away with it so far, but 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.





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 the small, unmarked piece of metal.

\* *lucerna*: a Roman oil lamp, usually made of pottery, shaped like a bowl with a handle on one side and a spout on the other.

'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?'

'It's a *curse*, Isidora! I'm not going to *read* it!'

'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 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.'

\* *Charon*: in Greek and Roman mythology, the ferryman who carries the souls of the dead across the River Styx to the underworld.

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, its damp mustiness 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 had 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 denunciation, 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 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 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.



But before Lucius could continue with his search for the truth, there came an unwelcome announcement: a troupe of gladiators from the school was being sent to take part in a festival of games in the seaside town of Pompeii, a whole week's march to the south – and Lucius would be joining them...



# PART ONE

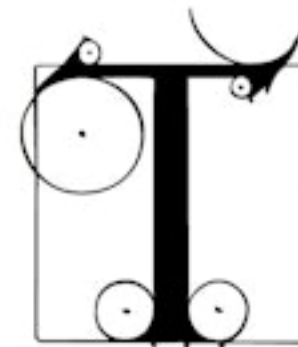
PROPHECY



# CHAPTER I

POMPEII, 19 AUGUST AD 79

*120 hours before the eruption of Vesuvius*



he midday sun beat down on Lucius as he pursued Quin through the streets of Pompeii. He glimpsed his brother's tall, athletic figure up ahead, sauntering along through the crowds heading west towards the Forum.\* Lucius would have preferred to walk side by side with Quin through this unfamiliar city, but sensed he would not be welcomed.

Smells of cooking meat from the fast-food shops mingled with the stench wafting over from the fish-sauce factories near the harbour. Lucius's ears echoed with the cries of fruit sellers and wine merchants and the pipes and drums of buskers. The noise and

*\* Forum: the main marketplace, which was also the place for business meetings and political discussions.*

squalor reminded him of Suburra, the area where he now lived in Rome. Yet Pompeii seemed to carry an extra air of menace. The shadow-filled alleys, the hard faces of the young men, the cold-eyed stare of a beggar woman – they all spelled danger to Lucius. Maybe it was his imagination, but Pompeii seemed like a city brimming with desperate and unscrupulous people who'd murder you for the price of a loaf of bread. He was glad he'd decided to follow Quin. Somehow, he felt his brother needed watching in a place like this. Of course, Quin was a gladiator and very capable of looking after himself – yet Lucius knew he could be hot-headed at times, and in these strange and scary streets he might very easily get himself into trouble.

From a nearby side street, Lucius heard a cry of pain. His natural caution made him want to hurry on past, but then he saw Quin turn and enter the alley. Hesitantly, Lucius followed, rubbing the ring on his forefinger for luck. It was his only memento of his father, and had become his talisman. Concealing himself behind a pile of amphorae,\* Lucius saw Quin approach a group of rough-looking young men. They were jeering and pushing around a lad of about their own age. From his smart, formal toga, now bespattered with mud, Lucius could tell the victim was a young man of status, though this did not seem to count for much among his tormentors.

\* *amphorae* (singular *amphora*): earthenware storage jars.

His sense of fairness clearly offended, Quin impulsively strode into the *mêlée* and pushed aside one of the bullies, who had been holding the victim in a neck lock. The bully squealed in surprise and fell to the ground. His friends immediately closed in around Quin, their jeers turning to snarls of anger.

There were six of them – three armed with sticks – against the unarmed Quin. Lucius groaned. He steeled himself, knowing he would have to go and help his brother. With his slender build, Lucius wasn't made for physical violence. He cursed their fate for bringing them here to Pompeii.



It was ten days since Crassus, the lanista of the gladiator school, had made the announcement. The school had received a great honour, he said: it had been chosen to represent Rome at the forthcoming games in Pompeii. A total of thirty gladiators would be going, including Quin. And Lucius had been dismayed to learn that he too was among those selected to go. It was a seven-day march to Pompeii, and there would be a further week spent in the city. Taking the return march into account, that meant that Lucius would be gone from Rome for three whole weeks – time he had been hoping to spend searching for his father. What if Aquila tried to contact him during that time? It seemed that fate had once again intervened to prevent them from meeting.



Lucius was surprised to have been chosen. Surely there would be slaves at the gladiators' quarters in Pompeii; what did they need him for? Equally baffling was Quin's inclusion in the party. He may have recently fought and won his first combat in the arena, making him a veteranus, yet he remained one of the least experienced gladiators at the school. It almost seemed as if Ravilla wanted to get both Lucius and Quin away from Rome. He had probably sensed Lucius's growing suspicions of him, but why send Quin? Ravilla had always seemed on very friendly terms with him.

It had been a tough march from Rome to Pompeii – especially for Lucius, who wasn't used to travelling such distances on foot. Being less valuable than the gladiators, he was also given smaller rations for the journey. As well as suffering from hunger and exhaustion, Lucius felt lonely. Quin mingled with his fellow gladiators during the rest stops and in the evenings, but Lucius was excluded from their banter. He was sad that the changes in their family circumstances had driven him and Quin apart. He'd never been best friends with his brother, but he remembered times when they'd had fun together. Nowadays, Quin was focused only on his new 'familia' at the gladiator school, and seemed to have almost forgotten that he had a real family as well. Lucius, however, could not stop thinking about his family. As they marched along the dusty road, he occupied the hours wondering where his father might be, or

hoping that his mother and sister would remain safe without him or Quin around. He wished many times that Isidora could be with him. He really missed her cheerful presence.

By the sixth day, they had reached the beautiful sweep of the Bay of Neapolis.\* The sun sparkled on the blue sea as they marched through the pretty resort towns of Baiae, Puteoli, Neapolis and Herculaneum, with their white-walled villas and pink-tiled roofs. People with friendly faces clapped and cheered as they passed.

Looming ever closer as they continued east was the brooding bulk of Mount Vesuvius, its cone-shaped summit wreathed in smoke. Lucius remembered reading of this mountain in Strabo's *Geography*. The Greek scholar had described it as having rocks at its summit that looked as though they had been 'eaten out by fire'. The mountain was certainly much bigger than he had expected, and dominated their horizon for most of the final day's march.

On the morning of the seventh day, the gladiator troupe arrived in Pompeii. The crowds were out to welcome them, but they struck Lucius as a cruder, less respectful populace than those in other towns they'd passed through. A few catcalls could be heard among the cheers, and there were some mocking salutes. A group of young women giggled as the gladiators passed them. Young boys stared open-mouthed at the bulging muscles on display.

\* *Neapolis: present-day Naples.*



Several of the buildings they passed were covered in scaffolding. Lucius had once read in his father's library that Pompeii was practically a new town after its virtual destruction in an earthquake seventeen years earlier. Many people had arrived in the years since to make their fortunes here, putting up new buildings to replace the damaged ones and then renting them out. They had become the new elite, displacing the old moneyed families that had been Pompeii's original inhabitants. Lucius remembered Aquila telling him that Pompeii had become a wilder, rougher place since the earthquake, almost like a frontier town on the edge of the empire.

The troupe soon arrived at the Schola Armatorum, the gladiator barracks where they would be quartered during their stay in Pompeii. It looked like a new, post-earthquake building, its outer walls freshly decorated with colourful frescoes of gladiators in combat. They were greeted at the entrance by the manager of the Schola, a tall, thin man by the name of Gaius Calidius. He showed them around the spacious interior of the building, which included a training arena, a weapons room, a trophy room, a communal dining area and a space for relaxation, as well as dormitories.

Several dormitories were already occupied by gladiators who had arrived from other cities on the Italian peninsula. Calidius told them that five troupes in total would be competing in the games, and it was all being generously sponsored by Marcus Nemonius

Valens, a wealthy businessman of high standing in Pompeii. It promised to be a spectacular event.

Lucius was quartered with the slaves who staffed the Schola Armatorum. He decided not to tell them that he wasn't actually a slave himself, fearful that this might cause resentment. In his simple brown tunic, caked in dust after his long journey, he supposed he must have been indistinguishable from a slave anyway. It would have greatly surprised his dormitory mates to learn that just weeks ago he'd been living a life of luxury, with slaves of his own. Lucius could scarcely believe it himself. His old life was rapidly taking on the quality of a dream.

After he had washed and changed, Lucius went off to find Quin to check that he had a decent place to sleep. He found him in the atrium talking with Crassus. Quin was asking the lanista for permission to go out and look around the city. To Lucius's surprise, Crassus agreed. And so it was that Quin stepped out into the sunlit street and Lucius decided, on impulse, to follow him...



Now Lucius wished he'd tried to stop Quin from ever venturing out into these savage streets. They should have stayed in the safety of the Schola Armatorum, or at least waited until they could be guided to the safer areas by a trusted local. He watched despairingly



as the youths closed in around Quin. Lying dazed on the floor of the alley was the well-attired young man Quin had tried to save. Lucius saw the bullies raise their sticks high above their heads and draw back their legs to kick his brother. How could Lucius help? He wasn't a fighter!

As the first blows began to land on Quin, Lucius gritted his teeth, trying to muster up some courage to join the fray. Before he could, there came a sudden explosion of movement from Quin. One of the bullies went flying backwards, another was sent spinning into a wall, while a third was tossed head over heels, landing in a groaning heap near where Lucius was hiding. One of the remaining boys, deciding that he'd met his match, fled down the alley. Two, however, remained. The bigger of them – more man than boy – spread his arms wide. In his right fist, a knife blade glinted. He advanced on Quin and thrust the knife towards his chest. Quin darted out of reach, and in the same movement kicked the knife out of the young man's hand. As he did so, he was clouted over the head by the other lad's stick. Quin's eyes glazed over. His legs wobbled, and he crashed to his knees.

Lucius had seen enough. He came charging out of his hiding place and ran at the younger boy from behind, pushing him. The boy staggered but remained on his feet. When he turned and saw Lucius's puny frame, his lips spread in a nasty grin. By now the bigger lad had retrieved his knife, and Lucius found

himself facing not just one but two young Pompeiian street fighters.

He felt a heavy blow on his arm, but it came from neither of the two local lads. It came, instead, from Quin, who by now had staggered back to his feet and was glaring furiously at his younger brother.

'What are you doing here?' he hissed. He began grappling with the bigger of the bullies, but still seemed to have time and energy to make his feelings known to Lucius. 'Were you following me?'

'I'm sorry,' said Lucius, as he backed away from the other lad. 'I didn't want to leave you on your own in a strange city.' He leapt to one side as the boy's stick came crashing down, missing him by a whisker. 'Looks like I was right to be worried!'

Quin angrily forced the big Pompeiian youth onto his back. 'I know this city better than you think,' he spat.

'You've been here before?' asked Lucius, picking up a broken amphora and desperately hurling it at his assailant.

'I came here once on business,' Quin replied curtly, as he pinned his adversary to the ground.

'You mean with Father?'

Quin was so enraged by this question, he let go of the bully. 'You know, Ravilla's right about you!' he growled. 'You're nothing but a little sneak! Always spying on your betters!'

'Look out!' yelled Lucius.



Quin dodged as a knife blade brushed narrowly past his arm. But his moment of inattention cost him dearly. As Quin lunged to his left, his opponent pushed him further in that direction, wrenching himself around so that he was now on top of him, with his knife pressing into Quin's neck. At the same time the other boy forced Lucius onto his back and was now kneeling on his chest, stick raised high, ready to bring it crashing down on Lucius's skull.

Both Lucius and Quin had lost their fights – but this was not the arena. There would be no last-minute pleas from the crowd for clemency. All they could expect now was death – in a Pompeii side street, at the hands of a couple of thugs. What an ignominious ending to their lives!

Just then there came a low rumble that seemed to emerge from beneath the ground. The rumble became a violent shaking that Lucius felt deep within his bones. The pile of amphorae collapsed, shattering into a thousand clay shards. From above, roof tiles began to tumble. One of them hit the big Pompeiian lad on the head. Screams could be heard from the main thoroughfare, as clouds of pinkish-brown dust rose to fill the narrow alley.

Lucius coughed and choked on the dust. When the shaking stopped and the dust finally began to clear, he found his opponent had fled. The larger youth was lying unconscious on his side, a bloody gash across the top of his forehead. Behind him, Lucius heard footsteps

receding. He turned in time to see his brother striding away down the alley towards the street.

'Quin!' he yelled, but Quin didn't break his stride. Soon he had disappeared around the corner.

Lucius slowly picked himself up.

'Thank you!' came a weak voice from the dusty shadows at the side of the alley.

Lucius peered towards the source of the voice. 'Who's there?'

As the dust continued to settle, he saw the figure of the boy who had been the original victim of the bullies.

'My name is Eprius,' said the boy, struggling to his feet. 'You and that other young man were very brave, coming to my aid like that.'

His toga was dirty and torn and there was blood on his cheek. Yet he had the accent and bearing of a person of noble rank.

'You're welcome,' said Lucius. 'I'm pleased you're all right. What was all that shaking just now?'

'An earthquake,' said Eprius. 'We're quite used to them here in Pompeii, although they have become more frequent and violent of late. The timing of this one was most fortuitous, wouldn't you agree?'

Lucius smiled and nodded. 'I'm Lucius,' he said. 'The other one was my brother, Quintus. Why were those boys picking on you?'

Eprius blushed and looked down at his sandals. 'I'd rather not say, if you don't mind. Perhaps I've strayed where I shouldn't – done a few things I wish I hadn't.



This city can be cruel, you know. It punishes those who cross the line, and it doesn't matter who you are.'

Lucius didn't know what to make of this strange speech, so he simply said: 'Well, I'm glad we could be of help.'

'I thank you, Lucius,' said Eprius. 'May the gods protect you and your brother during your stay in our city.' He nodded his farewell and limped back up the alley towards the main street.

Lucius was now alone. With a jolt, he realised that he had no idea how to get back to the Schola Armatorum. He was about to run after Eprius and ask him for directions, when he stopped. He felt a prickling of his neck hairs. Someone was watching him, he was sure of it. He surveyed the dim surroundings of the alley. The big Pompeiian youth still lay sprawled unconscious in the dust. Apart from him, no one was about.

Then he saw them, glinting up at him from the shadows: a pair of eyes.

Lucius couldn't move. He stared back at the eyes. Dark pinpricks surrounded by pools of silvery blue, beneath hooded lids, they seemed to bore right into him, fixing him to the spot.

Gradually, the owner of the eyes rose up from the shadows and emerged into the light. Lucius saw that it was just a little girl – a girl even younger than his sister Valeria. She was small, with a round, grubby face, tanned deep brown from a life spent on the streets. Dressed in rags, with a dirty scarf wrapped

around her head, she was nothing more than a waif, an urchin, perhaps seven years old – yet her eyes continued to mesmerise him. Bright, almost luminous blue within her brown face, they seemed ancient and full of mysterious wisdom.

As Lucius stared back at her, the little girl raised her hand to the sky and began to shout strange words at him: 'I see darkness,' she said, 'a sky so black it blots out the sun. This shaking of the ground is just the start. I see terrible things coming out from the underworld. The doors of Hades\* shall stand open and send forth fire and scalding winds. The sea shall swell and rage and foam. The clouds shall drip with burning fire.'

'What do you mean?' Lucius asked her.

'I see the end,' muttered the girl. 'The end of days. The end of everything!'

Just then there came the sound of approaching footsteps and voices echoing off the narrow walls. The girl looked startled and tried to shrink back into the shadows, but Lucius grabbed her arm.

'Are you a seer?' he asked her. He'd heard of people who claimed to see the future, but they were usually very old.

The girl tried to pull away from him, but Lucius held her tight. A group of friends appeared at the end of the alley, laughing and chattering. One of them, a young woman, noticed Lucius and the little girl.

\* *Hades: the Roman underworld, the abode of the dead.*

'Ah, look!' she cried. 'Atia's found a friend. I wouldn't touch her if I were you, stranger. She's nothing but a street urchin, and she only ever has one thing to sell – doom.'

'You know her?' Lucius asked the woman, still holding on to the girl.

'Oh, everyone who lives around here knows Atia,' said the woman as she laughed. 'And everyone knows she's crazy. If you want prophecies, there are plenty of genuine, adult seers in the town.' She looked at the girl. 'Go home, Atia – if you have one – and leave the young man alone.'

Lucius released his hold on the girl and she melted back into the shadows. The woman rejoined her friends and they continued on their way, their laughter, like the twittering of birds, gradually fading away.

Once again, Lucius found himself alone in the alleyway. He wondered if he should try to find Atia. He was intrigued by her words, and wanted to know more. But then he heard more footsteps, and Quin reappeared.

'I suppose I can't very well leave you alone in this city,' he said to Lucius. 'Come along then, little brother!' He turned about and began marching back up the alley. Lucius, greatly relieved, trotted along after him.

'Please tell me why you came here before,' Lucius asked once he'd caught up with him.

'None of your business,' said Quin, increasing his pace and forcing Lucius to break, once again, into a jog. The two of them continued back to the Schola Armatorum in silence.



# CHAPTER II

20 AUGUST

*100 hours before the eruption*



**B**

y the next morning, Lucius had managed to put Atia out of his mind. Instead, as he helped serve up a breakfast of barley, boiled beans, oatmeal, raisins and ash to the gladiators, he was consumed with thoughts of his father. Could it be true that he had once come here, to Pompeii, on business? It made sense of his father's observations to him that Pompeii was like a wild frontier town. How could he have known that except through personal experience? And if he did come here, then perhaps there were clues somewhere that could lead Lucius to him. He wished he could ask Quin what exactly their business had been in Pompeii. But Quin always became furious whenever he asked

such questions. Besides, his brother had already finished his breakfast and was now in the training arena practising his moves. Lucius wondered what Isidora would advise him to do. She was always full of ideas. If only she could be here with him, he wouldn't feel half so miserable or alone.

After he'd had his own breakfast, Lucius went to find Crassus to receive his instructions for the day. Crassus was in the training arena, busy tutoring a Thracian gladiator on the finer points of fighting with a curved sword, and a quarter of an hour went by before Lucius could capture the lanista's attention.

'I'm sure there's plenty you can do, Lucius,' said Crassus impatiently. 'But I can't think about that right now. The games are starting tomorrow and I've got to get these men into shape. I'll send you your orders shortly. In the meantime, why don't you ask the slaves if you can help with anything?'

So Lucius went to see Piso, the head slave. Piso looked him up and down and shook his head dismissively. 'I've got nothing for you. Go and see the cook.'

It turned out that Lucius was not needed by the cook, nor by the slaves in charge of cleaning or maintenance. Frustrated and bored, he retired to the dormitory and lay on his bed. If he'd been back at the villa, he would have spent this time in his father's library, reading about philosophy or history. He recalled the dry smell of the papyrus scrolls as he opened them to reveal

beautifully written texts and exciting new worlds of knowledge and ideas. Now his father's books had been sold, and there were strangers sitting in his library.

An hour crawled by and the promised orders from Crassus failed to materialise, so Lucius decided to remind him of his presence by returning to the training hall. The gladiators were gleaming with sweat by now as Crassus pushed them through their routines again and again. He spotted Quin making sweeping motions with his net and jabs with his trident at a shield and dummy suspended from a swinging pole. After each strike of the shield, he had to step smartly to one side to avoid the heavy sandbag attached to the rotating pole as it swung back towards him. The cat-like reflexes he had developed from this exercise had probably saved his life against the big Pompeian boy the day before.

Eventually, Crassus spotted Lucius sitting on a bench at the edge of the arena. The lanista frowned, and at first Lucius thought he must be angry, but then he realised that Crassus was deep in thought. After a moment, Crassus beckoned to him. Lucius followed him to a room adjoining the arena. The room, which was lined with shelves containing spare gladiatorial equipment, also contained a table, a chair and some writing materials. Crassus wiped the arena dust from his hands and seated himself at the table. He took a piece of plain papyrus\* from the top of a pile, dipped

\* *papyrus*: paper made from an Egyptian reed.



a reed pen into a bronze inkpot and began to write. Lucius peered over the lanista's broad shoulder. In his shaky, rather uncertain hand, Crassus was writing a simple message of greetings and respect to the local worthy who had paid for the games.

When he had finished, he rolled up the papyrus, tied a ribbon around it and handed it to Lucius. 'Take this to Marcus Nemonius Valens,' he instructed. 'Make sure you hand it to him personally.'

'Why personally?' asked Lucius.

Crassus sighed and leaned back in his chair. 'I've invested a lot of hours and sweat on that bunch out there,' he said, nodding towards the door that led back into the arena. 'Your uncle has invested something even more precious – his money. We know nothing about this Valens character. This is the first games he's sponsored. I want you to look the man in the eyes as you hand him the message – try and see what kind of man he is. Cruel or humane? The kind of man who'll be merciful to my gladiators if they lose a bout – or the kind who'll think nothing of ordering their deaths if the crowd demands it? Take a look at his slaves while you're there, in his house. You can always judge a man by his slaves. Do they look happy? Sad? Frightened? I'll be waiting for your report with interest.'

Lucius stared at him. 'You want me to be your spy.'

'Apparently you have a talent for it –' Crassus answered with a smirk. '–According to your brother.' He laughed. 'I guess it must run in the family!'

This was not the first time Crassus had mocked Lucius about his father and his alleged career as an informer. Lucius felt his face heating up. He clenched his fists to keep himself under control. If he spoke his feelings now, it could easily cost him his job.

'Where does Valens live?' he asked stiffly. He would do as Crassus wanted. After all, it would be interesting to meet the man who might end up deciding Quin's fate.

'In a large house in the north of the city, near the Vesuvius Gate,' answered Crassus. 'Ask for directions when you get to the Forum. Anyone will be able to tell you. He's one of the richest men in Pompeii.'



In the oldest area of the city, around the Forum, the streets were narrow and crooked. The roads were clogged with animal dung, rotting vegetables and other rubbish. Overflowing water from the city's fountains and drains turned the roads into filthy rivers, making Lucius grateful for the high pavements and stepping-stone road crossings. But these couldn't protect him from the overpowering smells of sweat and manure, not to mention the stale human urine that was used in the city's laundries to clean and bleach the citizens' smart white togas.

The city seemed caught up in election fever, and the Forum was filled with supporters of various candidates

for the offices of aedile and duovir,\* all trying to out-shout each other. The walls of houses and shop fronts were daubed with election slogans in red and black paint:

MARCUS HOLCONIUS PRISCUS  
FOR DUOVIR!

I ASK YOU TO ELECT GAIUS JULIUS  
POLYBIUS. HE BAKES GOOD BREAD

ALL THE LATE-NIGHT DRINKERS ASK YOU  
TO VOTE FOR MARCUS CERRINUS VATIA  
FOR AEDILE

THE PETTY THIEVES SUPPORT VATIA  
FOR AEDILE

As before, Lucius felt nervous and vulnerable as he passed through the agitated, sweating crowds. He sensed malevolent eyes upon him, sizing him up, making preparations to attack. A beggar's dog barked loudly at him, making him jump. Once or twice, in the gloomier alleyways, he thought he glimpsed the street urchin, Atia, peering up at him from the shadows.

The street sloped upwards quite steeply as he walked north from the Forum, and Lucius was hot

\* *aedile*: a junior official responsible for organising festivals and maintaining public order; *duovir*: one of a pair of senior officials, with various duties.

and tired by the time he arrived at Valens's house. The entrance was simply a door placed between two shops – a jeweller's and a shoe shop. The door, however, was massive: three metres high and bronze-studded.

Lucius knocked, wondering if his feeble raps would even be heard above the street noises. But the door was soon opened by a tall, well-muscled porter wearing a green tunic with a red belt. He looked down his nose at Lucius. With his blond hair and pale complexion, Lucius guessed he must be of Germanic origin.

'What do you want?' the porter asked.

Lucius held out the scroll. 'My master, Appius Seius Crassus, wishes me to convey this message to Marcus Nemonius Valens.'

'I'll see he gets it,' said the porter, holding out a broad palm.

'I was told I must hand it to him personally,' said Lucius, trying hard not to be overawed by the man's size and fierce look.

'Let him in, Marcipor,' came a soft voice from within.

The porter stood aside and Lucius entered. The door closed behind him, cutting off the sounds of the street. He found himself in a corridor, not much wider than the door. The air was cool and scented with roses. From somewhere in the house, Lucius could hear the faint chirruping of tropical birds.

Another man, dressed in a spotless white tunic, now stood before him – the household steward, Lucius



The air was hot and deathly still as he walked back towards the Schola Armatorum. The city was quiet, its people in their homes, some perhaps still sleeping off the previous night's revelries. The atmosphere felt dense and heavy, yet somehow fragile, like a bubble about to burst.

Suddenly his path was blocked by Ravilla. 'Are we ready?' his uncle asked, looking agitatedly at something beyond Lucius's head. 'Remember, we must be gone by midday.'

Lucius had been so concerned with Quin, he'd forgotten about Atia's prediction. 'I need to fetch my brother,' he said, sidestepping Ravilla. As he did so, he noticed something red on his uncle's toga. It looked like a smear of blood. A horrid thought struck him.

'Where is Atia?' he asked urgently.

'How would I know?' said Ravilla impatiently. 'More to the point, where's Crassus? We should be leaving by now.'

'What have you done with Atia?' Lucius demanded.

Lucius was suddenly sure that Ravilla had killed her. He'd silenced her before she could pass on her warning to Valens, so that Valens would remain in Pompeii and die in the coming devastation. Of course, all knowledge of Ravilla's big secret would die with him – or so Ravilla thought.

Ravilla tried a reassuring smile, but he wasn't as talented as Valens at concealing his true feelings, and the panicked look in his eyes betrayed him.

'Atia is fine,' he said. 'The girl is a complete faker, of course. She made up that story about me and Aquila – you know, that one about the Tarpeian Rock. Complete fiction.'

'Then why are you so concerned that we leave by midday?' asked Lucius, fixing him with a steely look. 'If she's a faker, what's the hurry?'

Ravilla uttered a nervous laugh. 'Well, it's best not to take any chances, you know!'

Crassus emerged from the building's entrance at the head of a line of gladiators. 'We're all ready for the off, sir,' reported the lanista.

'Good,' said Ravilla. 'We must be out of here in the next five minutes.'

'Very good, sir.'

Lucius was now worried that Ravilla would insist on leaving before Quin had been fetched from his bed. He moved towards the Schola entrance, but before he could reach it he felt someone grab his arm.

'You are Lucius, yes?' asked a slave, breathless from running.

'Yes.'

'I have a message for you. From Eprius.'

Lucius took the scroll he was handed. As he did so, he noticed his hand was shaking. There was a vibration coming from beneath the street, deep down in the earth. He could hear a rumbling that grew steadily louder with each second.

*Another earthquake!*



The horses attached to the wagons behind him started to whinny. Boxes, just loaded, tumbled to the ground. The earth itself was trembling, sending up thin clouds of dust. A boom rolled across the plain, followed immediately by another, and Lucius was almost knocked off his feet by a sudden scorching blast of air.

One of the gladiators shouted: 'Look at that!'

He was pointing at Vesuvius.

Something monstrous had happened to the mountain. At first it seemed as though a gigantic, brawny fist had smashed its way through the summit. A dense, brown, unimaginably tall column was rising straight up from the mountaintop into the cloudless blue sky. Narrow at its base, it gradually widened as it rose until, at its apex, it fanned outwards. It reminded Lucius of the branches of a tree, only he could see that the trunk of this colossal tree was not solid, but a thundering, boiling mass of violent upward movement. The branches at the top split and split again into millions of slender brown tendrils that spread out across the sky, then curved slowly downwards, dissolving at their edges into a fine, falling mist.

*The end of days is come*, thought Lucius calmly. The messenger boy had collapsed to his knees and was shielding his face from the sky, mumbling entreaties to the gods. Many of the gladiators had fled back indoors. One had untethered a horse and was galloping wildly eastwards, heading for the Sarno Gate. Ravilla was

shouting orders at Crassus, but it was hard to hear him above the deafening rumble. Crassus ignored him anyway. He simply stared at Vesuvius.

When Lucius looked back towards the mountain, he could no longer see it. Now the whole view to the north was a dense brown, rolling fog that was advancing rapidly towards them across the plain. It was like one of the sandstorms described so vividly by Quintus Numidicus in his North African chronicles.

Within seconds, the storm had hit the northern suburbs of Pompeii, and Lucius could see that it was made not of sand but of rocks. The rocks tumbled so thickly, they seemed like a single, solid, churning mass, engulfing the city and everything else from horizon to horizon. The coming storm cloaked everything it passed over, blocking it from sight. At its leading edge, Lucius saw thousands of individual rocks bounce off red roofs and pediments, pummelling trees and knocking statues from their pedestals.

The street Lucius was standing in was suddenly full of people fleeing, either to the south, or west towards the harbour. Lucius was jostled, spun around and nearly knocked over as hundreds of panicked citizens surged past him. The falling rocks were coming closer all the time – they were just a few blocks away now. Crassus was pushing the remaining gladiators back into the Schola. Ravilla, evidently realising that escape from Pompeii was now impossible, followed him inside. Lucius dragged the cowering messenger boy to



his feet and hauled him towards the entrance. They dashed into the vestibule just as the first rocks began to rain down on the street outside.

Crassus slammed the door shut. The noise outside and above was a continuous, thunderous, clattering roar. The walls were visibly trembling and drifts of plaster dust fell from the ceiling. The lanista stared fearfully upwards. 'How long before the roof collapses?' he asked no one in particular.

Piso, the head slave, was sweeping up the remains of a bust that had fallen from its plinth. 'The roof of this building is strong, sir,' he assured Crassus. 'We will be safe in here.'

'The Schola is new,' added Gaius Calidius, the building's manager. 'It was built after the earthquake, and it's withstood every storm and ground tremor since then.'

'Sorry if I don't share your optimism,' said Ravilla scornfully, 'but this is hardly your average storm or ground tremor.'

Calidius bowed his head.

'Is there a basement?' Ravilla asked.

'No, I'm afraid there isn't.'

'Well, which is the sturdiest room here?' asked Crassus.

Calidius thought about this. 'The armoury, I should think.'

He led the way towards the back of the building, followed by Ravilla, Crassus, and all the gladiators

and slaves. Meanwhile, Lucius went to Quin's room. It was dark except for the faint glow of an oil lamp. The window had been shuttered, but through the slats he glimpsed the dense and continuous rockfall. Eumenes was sitting on the edge of Quin's bed with a goblet in his hand. Quin was delirious, tossing and turning, ranting nonsense words.

'Hold him still, will you?' said Eumenes.

It took all of Lucius's strength to hold down his brother's powerful, heaving shoulders while Eumenes poured the medicinal potion into his parched mouth.

'This contains valerian root,' explained Eumenes. 'It should keep him calm during these final stages of his life.' He looked towards the window. 'What manner of storm is this?'

'Rocks falling from the sky,' said Lucius, keeping his eyes on Quin. 'They're coming out of Vesuvius.'

They heard a sound directly above their heads like a cracking of timbers, and dust began to fall in alarming quantities.

'We have to get out him of here,' said Lucius. 'Everyone's in the armoury. Calidius thinks it's the safest place.'

Together they lifted Quin onto a stretcher, then hurriedly left the room, just as a huge timber crashed down onto the floor amid a fog of dust. They walked as fast as they could up the corridor. Through a doorway to the right, Lucius glimpsed the devastated training arena, the only part of the building open to

the elements. A falling cloud of rocks thundered down onto the arena floor, which had disappeared beneath a rapidly deepening layer of pale brown stones.

The armoury was not small. Yet, with everyone in the building – some forty people in total – crowded in there, it seemed cramped. A row of wooden cabinets containing armour and weapons lined the long wall at the back of the room. Space was quickly made for Quin on a bench fixed to the opposite wall. He seemed calmer now, thankfully. Lucius seated himself on the floor close to his brother.

The rockfall was an unrelenting, pounding rattle above them. The gladiators, usually a lively group, were muted. Everyone was too stunned to know what to say. There were frequent anxious glances at the ceiling, but – so far, at least – this part of the roof seemed to be holding firm under the relentless barrage. Ravilla looked nervous and jumpy, continuously getting up from his chair and pacing around, or engaging in hushed, whispered conferences with Crassus or Calidius.

Lucius's eye fell on the messenger, who was still on his knees praying. In all the confusion, Lucius had completely forgotten about the scroll with the message from Eprius! He took it out of his pocket. It carried the seal of the Domitii, Eprius's family. Lucius unfurled it. The message was very short, and the uneven handwriting suggested it had been written in a hurry. It read:

*My dear Lucius,*

*I have made an important discovery. I know where your father is. Come to Valens's house as soon as you can. Marcipor is expecting you and will let you in. I will meet you in the courtyard by the Neptune fountain. Then I will tell you everything.*

*Your friend, Eprius*

Lucius shook inside when he read the words 'I know where your father is'. If he had been able to, he would have run straight to Valens's house that minute. He had to get there – but how? He would be killed instantly if he stepped outside this building now. But surely these rocks couldn't go on falling for ever. At some point they had to stop. He could only hope that he and Eprius would still be alive by the time that happened.

The hours crawled by – Lucius wasn't sure how many. The bombardment outside continued without cessation, and it seemed to Lucius that the entire innards of the Earth were being emptied out onto Pompeii. With the sun and sky hidden by the stony storm, it was impossible to tell the time of day. The gladiators tried to keep their spirits up by singing. Some tried telling jokes, but the laughter that greeted these sounded harsh and forced. Cold meat, bread and water were retrieved from the kitchen. Crassus made sure that the rations were doled out fairly and



equally to everyone. Quin slept through most of this, his breathing jagged, his skin permanently bathed in sweat. Lucius gave Quin most of his water ration.

At some point, shortly after their meal, there came a terrifying bang from outside the room, followed by a ripping sound, as if the entire fabric of the building was being torn asunder. Crassus opened the door. 'The ceiling is splitting all along the corridor!' he yelled. He slammed the door shut just as a cloud of brown dust blew into the room.

'We'll be safe in here, I assure you!' vowed Calidius, though Lucius now detected a whine of fear in his tone.

Less than a minute after he had said this, a giant crack appeared above the doorway, sending a cloud of dust spiralling down. Everyone stared at the crack as it spread jerkily through the plaster, spidering outwards until most of the ceiling had splintered.

'By the gods!' groaned Ravilla. 'We're doomed!'

There followed a hideous, creaking, rupturing sound, and then half the ceiling fell in.

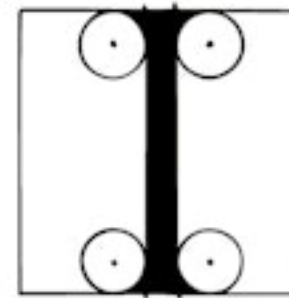
A gladiator sitting next to Quin died instantly as a heavy wooden beam crashed down on his head. Others seated nearby disappeared beneath the thick brown cascade of dust and rock that poured through the hole. Lucius was bombarded by rocks and was surprised at how light they felt as they bounced off him. He dived towards Quin, who was already half-submerged beneath the roaring avalanche. But before he could reach him, the wall directly above his brother

suddenly toppled forward. Time seemed to stand still for Lucius as he watched the wall, with its fresco of the winged goddess of victory, come falling down in one enormous chunk, entombing Quin beneath it. Lucius began pulling at the shattered brickwork of the wall, trying to reach Quin, but he felt himself weakening, losing consciousness, as the rocks battered him incessantly. Hands grasped him, pulling him back.

# CHAPTER XI

24 AUGUST

*8 hours after the start of the eruption*



n what remained of the armoury, Lucius lay in a daze on the floor, caked in yellowish-brown dust. One whole side of the room, nearest the door, had disappeared beneath the rockfall. Twenty people were buried under there, including Quin. He had lost his brother!

The remainder of the ceiling formed an irregular-shaped ledge that was somehow withstanding the rain of stones, and the survivors gathered beneath its meagre shelter. Ravilla was among them. He had climbed into one of the wooden cabinets on the back wall and was cowering inside it. Crassus was distributing helmets and shields to the others for protection in case the rest of the ceiling caved in.



Lucius barely noticed any of this, nor did he feel the bruises that now covered his body where the rocks had hit him. He was staring at the blurry curtain of stony rain that now formed the fourth wall of the room.

*Quin was gone!*

He felt Eumenes's hand on his shoulder. 'At least he died quickly,' the doctor said gently. 'Better than lingering on as the poison did its work.'

Lucius picked up one of the stones that had fallen near his foot. He turned it over in his hands. It was about the size of a child's fist, and full of tiny holes.

'These stones are so light,' he said to Eumenes. 'It looks like a sponge made out of stone.'

Eumenes chuckled at this description. 'It's pumice,' he said. 'It's full of air bubbles. They used it to make the domes of the famous baths at Baiae, because it's so light... But there's no hope for your brother, I'm afraid. Nor any of those other poor souls underneath there. No one could survive a pummelling like that.'

Lucius continued to stare at the deepening mound under which his brother lay buried. Was it his imagination, or was the storm of stones easing slightly?

'Hey, it's stopping!' cried one of the gladiators.

The thunderous noise began to diminish, and the cataract of stones became more sporadic.

'I can see the mountain,' said another voice.

Lucius looked up through the clouds of yellowish-brown dust and saw, beyond the collapsed wall of their room, beyond the training arena and the broken

roofs of Pompeii, the dark peak of Vesuvius. It looked different. The summit was flatter, with one side lower than the other.

As they watched, something very bright appeared at the lip of the lower side of the summit – a dazzling line of orange, shaped like a sinister, gloating smile. It spilled down the western slope of the mountain: a fast-moving, smoking, burning arc that left little spots of orange flame in its wake. Lucius instantly thought of Atia's prediction: *I have seen a crescent of fire that will cut us down like a bright sword.*

The stones had almost ceased falling now. A gladiator, with a helmet and shield to protect him, clambered up the great mound of stones that now filled the front half of the room. From the top, he watched the progress of the sickle-shaped line of flame.

'It's heading west,' he yelled. 'Straight for Herculaneum.'

Lucius immediately thought of his father. There had been a rumour that he was there.

'What is it?' someone cried.

The gladiator on the mound blinked and rubbed his eyes. 'I don't know,' he said. 'Something very hot – some kind of fiery river – straight out of the pits of Hades. Poor sods. It's moving so fast, they won't stand a chance in Herculaneum.'

*It may not have been true that Father was there!* Lucius told himself. *I am not going to lose my brother and my father in a single day!*



'We should use this opportunity to get out of here,' said Ravilla, emerging hesitantly from his cabinet. 'The stones aren't falling so heavily now. In our helmets and shields, we should be able to get through this.'

'Very good, sir,' said Crassus, staring at the mound of stones that lay between them and the rest of the Schola. 'How exactly do you propose we get out of here?'

'We can climb up a pile of these cabinets and then get out through the hole in the roof,' said Ravilla.

'Right!' said Crassus, looking pleased to have a job to do. He began issuing orders. Slaves and gladiators started ripping the cabinets from the walls and then piling them up to create a mound that they could use to climb towards the ceiling. Behind the cabinets there were more frescoes of winged victories carrying swords, shields, nets and spears. These reminded Lucius of the painting of the goddess that had fallen on top of Quin. A desperate idea flared in his mind.

'Part of the wall fell on top of him, just before the stones came down,' he murmured to Eumenes.

'What do you mean?' asked the doctor.

Without stopping to answer, Lucius grabbed an armoured breastplate and began using it like a shovel to dig into the mound of pumice.

'The part that fell is leaning against the part that's still standing,' he shouted as he worked. 'Quin was inside the angle. The wall may have protected him from the rocks. He may still be alive under there!'

Several gladiators stopped what they were doing when Lucius said this. They abandoned their tower-building and instead began digging rocks from the mound. After his impressive victories against the local gladiators, Quin was one of the most popular men in the familia. If there was any chance that he might still be alive, they would do whatever they could to rescue him.

'This is madness!' cried Ravilla. 'You're wasting time trying to dig out a corpse. We need to save ourselves. Quintus was almost dead from poisoning anyway, so what's the point?'

'You heard the man!' yelled Crassus. 'Now stop that at once and do as you're told!'

Maybe it was because oaths of loyalty didn't feel quite so important after all that had happened, or maybe it was because such oaths were outweighed by their loyalty to a trapped comrade, but not one of the gladiators obeyed Crassus's order. In fact, more of them joined the endeavour, using cabinet doors, helmets, shields or whatever came to hand to dig through the mound.

Within twenty minutes, they had reached the broken chunk of wall. Lucius, with help from one of the gladiators, dragged the dust-shrouded Quin from the little gap in which he had lain.

He was very still when they laid him down on the floor, and Lucius began to fear the worst.

'Quin?' he whispered into his ear. 'It's Lucius. Can



you hear me?’

*Nothing.*

Lucius began to cry, and a tear splashed on his brother’s cheek, forming a little river through the dust.

Quin blinked, then coughed, expelling a cloud of yellow dust. A smile slowly formed on his face. ‘Hey! Little brother!’

Lucius uttered a small scream of joy. He fell on Quin, hugging him hard. They gave him water, and cleaned the dust from his face and hair.

Eumenes examined him and pronounced it a medical miracle. ‘Your brother is still weak, but he seems better – a lot better! There are no more symptoms of the poison.’ Then he frowned and picked up one of the pumice stones. ‘What was it you likened these to? A sponge made of stone. I wonder whether...’

‘What?’ coaxed Lucius.

‘I’ve heard that pumice is highly absorbent – like a sponge. It’s just possible that this is what saved him. Being buried in pumice might somehow have absorbed the poison. Who knows?’

‘I can’t remember much since the fight,’ Quin said to Lucius. ‘What’s been going on?’

‘Oh nothing much,’ replied Lucius, chuckling. ‘You were poisoned. And then the mountain exploded and you were buried alive beneath a hill of stones.’

‘That’s all?’

‘That’s all.’

‘Who poisoned me?’

‘I think it was someone working for Valens.’

Quin looked at him.

‘He knew what you were planning to do, Quin. He has spies everywhere...’

Before they could continue this conversation, Crassus’s voice boomed out: ‘Right! Fun’s over, lads! Back to work now! Let’s get all these cabinets piled up.’

The miraculous survival and recovery of Quin had given the troupe a huge morale boost. Exhausted as they were, they willingly got on with the job of constructing a tower of cabinets. The tower was a precarious structure, and it collapsed a couple of times during the process, but eventually they managed to build it all the way up to the hole in the ceiling, where it met the remaining ledge of roof.

Ravilla sent his personal slave up first to test it. After he was safely up, Ravilla went next, then Eumenes, Crassus and Calidius, and finally the gladiators and slaves. Quin insisted on going up unaided, despite having the use of only one leg. Once Quin was safely up, Lucius made the climb himself. He let out a gasp when he took in the view at the top. The streets and buildings had all but disappeared and the entire city was submerged up to the level of the rooftops. It looked like a wild, rugged plain – no longer a city, but an undulating desert of stones. The air was clogged with brown, swirling dust that blew in his face and made him cough. Here and there through the gloom

they could see the glow from the oil lamps of other survivors who must also have managed to climb out of their buried homes.

The rockfall started to grow in strength. The pumice clanged on Lucius's Murmillo helmet and pounded painfully on his back and shoulders. In his fist he carried Eprius's crumpled note.

'Come on!' called Ravilla. 'Let's move on out!'

'Which way?' queried Crassus. 'I've completely lost my bearings.'

Ravilla cast around trying to find some landmark. Then he caught sight of the still-burning fires on the mountain. 'Anywhere but there!' he cried.

Crassus organised everyone into a column facing the opposite way from Vesuvius. In the distance they glimpsed a hazy cluster of lights that may have been Stabiae or possibly Surrentum on the southern side of the bay – towns that were hopefully beyond the range of Vesuvius's fury. A couple of poles were fitted to a wooden chair to create a crude litter to transport Quin.

'Line up with the others, Lucius!' yelled Crassus.

'I'm not going!' Lucius shouted back. He couldn't leave Pompeii yet – not while there was a chance of finding out where his father was.

'By all the gods, why not?'

'I have to do something first.'

'Leave him!' cried Ravilla. 'If the boy is determined to die, let him.'

'Here!' said Crassus, offering Lucius a large

Secutor's shield. 'Good luck, son!'

Lucius thanked him. He watched the column begin moving off into the darkness.

'Lucius!' called Quin, craning his neck to look back. 'What's going on?'

'Stay safe!' cried Lucius. 'I'll see you back in Rome!' Then, under his breath, he added: 'I love you, Quin.'



Lucius remembered that Valens's house was in the northwest of the city, north of the Forum. Vesuvius was due north of Pompeii, so he chose a route across the sea of stones a little way left of Vesuvius, hoping this would bring him more or less to the right part of town. The stones were pelting down at a fierce rate now, and he had to crouch beneath the shield for protection. Progress was very slow. With every step, he sank shin-deep in the pumice. Once or twice he lost his footing and tumbled down the slopes. Then he had to scramble hastily to his feet to avoid being buried beneath a fresh fall of stones. Here and there, under the eaves of roofs or beneath the tops of arches, he saw shadowy movements and the occasional flickering of a fire. So there was life in the city – it wasn't quite the end of days that Atia had predicted. But then he remembered that curving line of fire scything down the mountainside into Herculaneum, and he shuddered.

At length, the rockfall began to ease again. Soon



after that, he saw the bright light appearing once again at the lip of the mountain's summit. Each appearance of the fiery crescent seemed to coincide with a diminishing in the rockfall, as if the mountain could not produce both at once.

He watched the burning cloud descend at a furious rate, but this time, to his horror, he saw that it was coming straight towards Pompeii! Beyond Vesuvius, the Campanian plain seemed to rear up like a great black shadow pulsing with inner fire. A wave of heat hit him in the face, carrying with it a terrible stench of sulphur and burning. The cloud billowed upwards like a second mountain and seemed about to engulf the northern edge of the city. Then it subsided and its radiance faded, leaving only a sprinkling of little fires that marked its passage down the mountainside. The deadly wave had spent itself, thank the gods, before it could reach the city. But next time the people of Pompeii might not be so lucky. He had to find Eprius quickly, before they both perished.

But after another half-hour of struggling through the stones, Lucius was close to exhaustion. Each step had become excruciating. The strain of moving his legs through the loose piles of pumice, the weight of his shield, the bruising all over his body, had all taken its toll, and all he wanted to do was to go to sleep. To fall down among these soft, light stones, to feel them fall like gentle rain on top of him, to be buried in them like a warm cocoon – that was a very

tempting prospect.

He had no idea where he was. Every rooftop looked the same. He could keep going to the very limits of the city and never find Valens's house. For all he knew, he could be passing over it right now. He wished he'd paid more attention to the building's roof design. Did it have a distinctive ornamentation, or a tower? He had no idea, and he wondered how he ever thought he could find his way back there.

Finally, Lucius came to a halt. The stones were falling more heavily again. He crouched beneath his shield, feeling the pumice build up around his thighs, and accepting in his heart that he'd failed. He remained there for a long time, half-deafened by the drumming of the rocks on his shield. He knew he should try to look for some shelter, but his body, now it had stopped, seemed unable to start moving again. He looked around, hoping to find a roof with people under it – people who might possibly be able to help him find his way. But there were no people in sight. Instead, his attention was caught by something very odd right in front of him. It looked like the top of an iron-barred cage – it must be a very tall cage to rise so high above the level of the stones. With a rush of excitement, he realised what it was: the cage belonging to that African animal, the one with the long neck, in Valens's zoo. Somehow, he'd found Valens's house! He looked around him, and soon he began to recognise other features: the top of the peristyle colonnade,



and the smaller roof surrounding the courtyard. He quickly dug himself out of the mound of stones now rising around him, and began crawling back towards the front of the house.

He came to the atrium with the hole in the roof above the pool. The stones had piled up to about a metre below the level of the ceiling, and a short, easy jump took him inside the house. Oil lamps flickered in the shadows below him. So there was life in here! In the glow of these lamps, he saw that he was standing on the summit of a small pumice mountain, whose base extended almost to the edges of the expansive atrium floor. He carefully edged his way down the steep flank of the mountain. His hesitant descent quickly turned into an uncontrolled slide and then a chaotic tumble amid a minor avalanche of pumice. He landed face down on the floor, his body by now feeling like one big bruise.

With a groan, Lucius looked up to see where he was, and found himself near the entrance to the tablinum. The roof had partially collapsed here. A great, dusty mound of roof beams, tiles and pumice blocked off access to Valens's private study. Perhaps the master of the house was dead – Ravilla had prevented Atia from warning him of the danger. Well, if anyone deserved to perish today, it was Valens. Lucius imagined him dying alone in his little lair, surrounded by his scrolls full of other people's secrets, realising that all the money he'd extorted from his victims over the years was ultimately

worth nothing.

Yet some people must still be alive here – there were lamps burning in the recesses of the remaining portion of the room. Lucius prayed that the survivors included Eprius. There was no sound, except for the steady thunder of rocks above his head. He saw a flicker of light in the passageway that led to the kitchen. Perhaps he would find people there. He climbed unsteadily to his feet and hobbled across the room and down the corridor. When he reached the kitchen he peered in, then jerked backwards in shock.

Lying on the floor was Atia. There was blood on her tunic, and her extraordinary silvery-blue eyes were now still and lifeless. They would see no more mysteries. Lucius knelt down and closed them.

'Little Atia,' he whispered. 'You saw all this. You could have saved yourself – couldn't you?'

He reflected for a moment on the short, yet amazing life of this little girl. She had been born for a special purpose – she knew what it was, and was content to fulfil it and then die. For most people, himself included, life was a continuous, unfolding mystery, and the hardest part was to work out what one's own role should be.

Lucius was conscious that time was slipping away. The crescent of fire would return, as Atia had predicted, and this time it would sweep right over Pompeii. He had to find Eprius quickly and learn what he'd discovered, and then the two of them could



make their escape.

He walked over to the doorway on the far side of the kitchen and peered through it. The roof had collapsed in the passageway, blocking access to the slaves' quarters beyond. Returning to the tablinum, Lucius noticed that the peristyle was inaccessible from there, but could be reached by climbing through the window in the triclinium – the colonnade had partially survived the bombardment, possibly allowing access to the rear part of the house.

He entered the triclinium and eased himself through the window into the peristyle. The garden was, of course, buried under three metres of pumice, and all that remained of the surrounding colonnade was a narrow passage close to the wall, already filling up with stones. Oil lamps had been placed on the window ledges along the wall, almost like guides to a trail. This way, he was sure, he would find the remaining members of the household, whoever they might be.

He followed the peristyle as it bent to the right, then continued as far as the entrance to the marble-floored hall on his left. There were lamps burning in here and also in the equipment room adjoining the bath-house, whose door stood ajar. It was to the furnace room that lay beneath there that Eprius had taken him two nights ago.

Of course! It must have been Eprius who had laid the oil-lamp trail. He was leading Lucius back to their secret meeting place! His heart beating faster now,

Lucius ran across the hall, then along the length of the equipment room and down the narrow spiral steps at the end. He removed his helmet and crouched as he passed into the low-ceilinged furnace room. By the light of the fire burning in the brazier, he was overjoyed to see his friend Eprius.

But then his eyes took in the three people with him, seated on stools or baskets in the cramped underground space. There was Marcipor the porter, and the tall, thin boy who had poisoned Quin the previous night... And there was Valens.

# CHAPTER XII

25 AUGUST

*12 hours after the start of the eruption*



‘W

elcome, Lucius!’ Valens greeted him, smiling. ‘We’ve been expecting you!’

Lucius stared at him, aghast. He thought of the oil lamps laid out like a trail, leading him down to this room. Was this whole thing a trap?

‘As you can see, my household is somewhat diminished at present,’ continued Valens, ‘as is my ability to offer you my customary level of hospitality, but we have a little wooden box all ready for you here. Please do sit down.’

‘You were expecting me?’ spluttered Lucius, remaining on his feet. He turned to his friend. ‘What’s going on, Eprius?’

Eprius bowed his head, not meeting his eyes.



'I'm sorry, Lucius. He forced me to write that note. He was going to tell my parents everything if I didn't.'

'Do you know where my father is?' cried Lucius.

Eprius looked up, then shook his head, his eyes full of tears. 'I'm so sorry to have given you hope.'

'The lure worked,' chuckled Valens. 'And here you are, as I knew you would be. Not even a blizzard of stones is enough to keep you from your quest to find your beloved father.'

Lucius tried to get his breathing under control. 'Why?' he shouted at Valens. 'Why did you bring me here?'

'I should have thought it was quite obvious,' said Valens placidly. 'You overheard my conversation with your uncle the other night, then blabbed about it to your brother and Crassus. I can't tolerate that sort of behaviour, Lucius. Much as I like you, I have certain responsibilities to my clients. I vowed to Ravilla that I would protect his secret. I wasn't worried so much about your telling Crassus. He's part of my protected circle, and his loyalty to Ravilla virtually guarantees his discretion. Your brother, however, was a different kind of beast. Hot-headed, prone to emotional outbursts – I'm afraid I had no choice but to kill him.'

'Well, he survived.' Lucius smiled.

Valens raised his eyebrows and glanced at the tall, thin boy. The boy shook his head. 'He's lying,' he insisted. 'His brother drank enough of that stuff to kill a horse.'

'Quintus is dead,' said Valens mildly. 'Accept it, Lucius. And accept also that you must share the same fate. I'm afraid I simply can't trust you. You're too much like your father – virtuous to a fault.'

'You told me that my father taught you about virtue,' said Lucius. 'Was that another of your lies?'

'Not at all,' Valens replied, chuckling. 'Your father was a great teacher – though the lesson I learned from him may not have been the one he intended to teach. He taught me that virtue has nothing to do with status or appearance – a noble exterior too often hides a wicked heart. In his investigations here, he exposed many a villain among the most respected in our community. For your father, the answer was to punish them and thereby create a more virtuous society. But I saw different possibilities. With all this villainy secretly bubbling away beneath the surface of our public life, why expose it? Far better to profit from it. Your father would never have understood that, and I can tell that you can't either – I'm sorry about that, and I'm sorry that it means that you will have to die.'

He nodded at the tall, thin boy. 'Albinus, it is time.'

The boy rose to his feet, stooping to avoid the low ceiling, and drew a knife from his belt. Lucius backed away from him, tripping on the lowest step of the spiral stairway and falling onto his back.

'Wait!' cried Lucius, shrugging off the boy's attempt to grab hold of him. 'Think, Valens! Why are you doing this? We're all going to die here anyway!'

'Nonsense!' said Valens sharply. 'We will rebuild this town. We did it before, after the earthquake. Pompeii will rise again!'

Albinus now had Lucius in his clutches. He pulled him to his feet and placed the edge of the blade close to Lucius's neck.

'Have you seen what's happening up there?' cried Lucius desperately. 'There are waves of fire sweeping down the mountain, incinerating everything in their path. Herculaneum is already destroyed. One of them will soon hit Pompeii. This city is doomed, and we are, too, if we stay here!'

'Shall I kill him now?' growled the boy.

Valens was no longer smiling. He stood up and came very close to Lucius. He pointed up the stairwell and whispered: 'While that little girl lives, Pompeii will survive. That's what she told us.'

Lucius stared at him, eyes popping from his head. 'Then you don't know?'

'I'll kill him!' shrieked Albinus, and Lucius felt the sharpness of the blade pressing into his throat.

'Wait!' yelled Valens, pulling back the boy's arm. 'What don't I know?'

'Atia is dead!' said Lucius.

'What?' cried Valens, his face paling. 'You're lying!'

'I found her body in the kitchen,' murmured Lucius. 'Ravilla killed her.'

'Is this true?' demanded Valens, seizing Albinus by the collar and pushing him against the wall.

'Y-yes, sir,' admitted Albinus.

'Why wasn't I told?'

'I didn't want to upset you, sir.'

Valens pushed him to the ground.

'We have to go now!' said Lucius.

Valens didn't move. He was staring at the fire. Eventually he turned and faced the others: 'We're not leaving,' he said flatly. 'If we go up there, we could be hit by the wave of fire as we try to escape. We'll be safe down here. Let Vesuvius do its worst. These walls are thick.' He nodded towards some baskets in the corner of the room. 'We have enough food and water for a few days. When the mountain's fury is spent, we'll dig ourselves out. We'll move to another city and start again. Maybe to Rome. There's plenty of potential profit for the likes of me in that nest of vipers.'

He went and sat down on his stool. 'For now, we stay here!'

Lucius made for the stairwell. 'You stay if you wish!' he said. 'I'm leaving.' He turned. 'Eprius, are you coming?'

Eprius looked uncertain. He glanced sheepishly at Valens.

'I thought I had made myself clear,' said Valens. 'Eprius is not going anywhere, and neither are you.'

'Why do you care?' Lucius challenged him.

'I care because if, by some miracle, you do survive, Lucius, I don't want you going around telling everyone



Ravilla's secret – he may be my only surviving client, after all.'

Lucius shot him a hateful look. He grabbed Eprius's arm and pulled him up from his box. 'Come on!'

'Stop them, Marcipor!' ordered Valens.

The big, fair-haired porter stood in front of the stairwell, blocking the way.

'If you want to survive this, Marcipor, come with us,' said Lucius.

The porter didn't move.

'Come with us,' said Eprius softly.

Lucius turned in surprise. Eprius was breathing quickly. His eyes were still fearful but they possessed a glittering hardness Lucius hadn't seen before.

'Do you care for your life, Eprius?' snarled Valens.

'I don't think so!' answered the boy. 'It's not much of a life, is it, Valens? Not since I met you, anyway.'

Marcipor's normally impassive face was now frowning uncertainly.

'I am your master, Marcipor,' said Valens, his voice a mixture of velvet and steel. 'You will obey me.'

Marcipor appeared to hesitate for a moment, then he moved aside. 'My place is here, with my master,' he said to Eprius. 'But you go. Enjoy your life, my friend.'

Lucius began running up the steps. He could hear Eprius coming up behind him.

'Stop them!' echoed Valens's voice from below, but Marcipor must have blocked any attempt by Albinus to obey this order.

They ran through the equipment room and out into the hallway beyond, then picked their way as quickly as they could through the broken remains of the peristyle. Very soon they were back in the atrium, where they launched themselves at the mountain of pumice that would take them up to the roof. It was very hard to gain purchase on the slope, as the stones kept slipping and tumbling beneath their hands and feet, but after several attempts the pair neared the top of the mound. By this time, the pumice pile had reached almost to the very top of the ceiling, leaving them a tiny gap to squeeze through.

Finally, they emerged onto the roof, and Eprius gasped when he took in the changed landscape. He flinched and cried out as the stones pelted him. 'Here,' cried Lucius, handing him the shield. 'Put this over your head.'

'Which way?' yelled Eprius from under the shield.

Navigating from the fires on Vesuvius, Lucius swivelled himself to a position that he thought must face the harbour. 'This way to the sea!' he called. 'We can try and take a ship!'

Eprius nodded, and the two boys – one in a *Murmillo's* helmet, the other crouching beneath a *Secutor's* shield – began wading through the stones.

They moved slowly through the dusky brown wasteland. Lightning flashed above them and in its glow they picked out, here and there, the huddled shapes of people travelling in the same direction – and

that gave Lucius hope that they were indeed heading for the harbour. Another shimmer of lightning lit the underside of the clouds ahead of them, revealing in silhouette the city wall and its watchtowers. A series of pillars stuck up like broken teeth – the remains of a temple, perhaps?

They sensed growing numbers of people around them as they neared the base of the city wall. A low-roofed tunnel loomed out of the twilight, and they saw it was the nearly buried remains of one of Pompeii's great arched gateways. Its vaulted roof now rose less than a metre above their heads. They were shouldered roughly aside as lines of pedestrian traffic converged on this single exit point. But eventually Lucius and Eprius managed to join the general flow of refugees into the tunnel. Shouts and complaints echoed loudly in the congested darkness as people were jostled or trodden on.

The boys emerged at the top of a gentle slope. Lucius squinted into the dusty gloom, trying to make out the harbour. He could hear the sound of waves in the distance and could make out shapes in the pumice that might be wharves and quaysides – but where was the sea? With a shock, he realised he was looking at it. The masts of ships stuck up through the stones like the drowning arms of sailors. The pumice storm had covered even the sea – the stones were so light, they floated! There was no chance of an escape from the city by ship.

There were groans of despair as this awareness dawned on the people around them. The crowd gradually dispersed, some to the north, heading up the coast towards Herculaneum, others south, and still others turned back the way they had come. Lucius, recalling that Crassus had led the gladiators southwards, decided to join the refugees heading in that direction. At some point they must have crossed the River Sarnus, submerged like everything else by the blanket of stones. As they walked, Lucius noticed that the hail of pumice was easing once more. This provoked several sighs of relief from those around them.

'It seems to be easing,' panted Eprius.

'Come on!' said Lucius, quickening his pace. 'This means the mountain's getting ready to spit out another of those fiery surges.'

'I don't know if I can go any further,' gasped Eprius.

Lucius gave him a worried glance. The boy looked done in, barely able to raise his knees above the stones to keep going.

'You go on!' Eprius told him. 'I'll be fine here.'

Lucius tried pulling him forward, but he, too, was close to exhaustion, and found himself subsiding back into the stones. He looked back towards the city walls and the flickering torches of the lost souls now wandering the ruins. He looked beyond, towards the fire-speckled crest of Vesuvius, rising above the city like a brooding titan.



*Perhaps we'll be safe here, he thought. We may be far enough away.*

As Lucius watched, he saw a cloudy star appear on the mountain peak. The star swelled and deepened to a rosy orange flecked with black, then tipped out of the cavernous mouth like a giant lolling tongue. It seemed to expand as it rolled down the side of the mountain. As it advanced, it curved into a merciless smile. It was coming straight for them, as Lucius knew it would.

*I have seen a crescent of fire that will cut us down like a bright sword.*

The incandescent wave raced down the mountain into the plain. It was a grey, seething mass pulsing with orange, like a glowing cloud, and it moved faster than anything imaginable as it closed in on the city. Lucius watched it strike the northern walls and crash upwards like a breaking wave of flame and foaming gas. He saw walls shatter and roofs explode before it. He saw tiny black specks, that might be people, hurled backwards. The frothing tide rolled through the city, smothering it in a carpet of smoke and flame, engulfing and obliterating everything in its path. Lucius thought of Valens, Albinus and Marcipor, cooked alive in their little hideout beneath the ground. He prayed that Quin had made it out of the city safely.

The blast of hot air hit Lucius and Eprius seconds later; it was like being struck in the face by a scorching brick wall. It lifted both of them clear of the stones and

high into the air. Burned, wind-battered and barely conscious, they crashed down close to the stone-covered surf.



After what seemed like many hours, Lucius blinked and opened his eyes. The stones beside him swayed and sloshed, and he thought at first that he must be dead and on the banks of the River Styx.\* Gradually, it occurred to him that he was lying beside the sea – it was the waves that were moving the stones.

This had to mean that he was alive – he had survived!

The stones had stopped falling from the sky, and the world was filled with a hazy yellow light. Somewhere high above him, in the dust-choked air, the sun was doing its best to shine.

It hurt him to move his head, even slightly, but he managed it eventually, and there, next to him, sat Eprius. His toga was in rags, his face dirty and his hair singed, but he was smiling.

'We made it, Lucius,' he said.

Eprius climbed tenderly to his feet, then put his hand out to help Lucius up. Eprius pointed to the southwest. 'What is that place?' he asked.

Lucius saw that the expanse of pumice continued as far as Stabiae, a wealthy resort on the coast. Beyond it

\* *River Styx: in Greek and Roman mythology, a river which the dead must cross to reach the underworld.*

he could see crystal-clear blue sea, and, basking in the sunlight, the long arm of land that formed the southern end of the bay. Near the end of this promontory, he glimpsed the red-tiled roofs and white walls of a seaside town. It was towards this that Eprius was pointing.

‘I think that must be Surrentum,’ said Lucius.

‘Shall we go?’

Lucius smiled and nodded. He put his arm around Eprius’s shoulder, and the two boys began to limp their way along the shore.

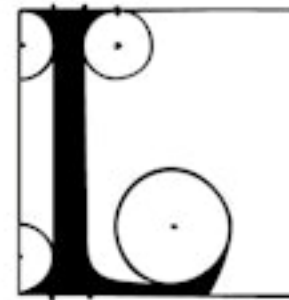
## END OF BOOK II



FOLLOW LUCIUS'S FURTHER ADVENTURES IN:

GLADIATOR SCHOOL III

# BLOOD AND SAND



Lucius had spent the entire morning trying to coax an elephant to kneel before a statue of the emperor Titus. He was having no luck. He raised his *ankus* – a training stick as long as a man's arm – and slid it down the back of the great beast's foreleg, but the elephant remained stubbornly upright. She had knelt happily just a few minutes earlier and received a bucketful of tasty roots for her pains. But, for some reason, when faced with the square-jawed features of the most powerful man in the known world, she always opted to stand.

Personally, Lucius found it hard to blame the creature for refusing to show the man respect. After all, it was his imperial agents who had stolen her from

her homeland in Africa and brought her here to this strange and frightening city. The elephant, so Lucius had been told, had been driven into a pit by Numidian hunters, then fed only barley juice for days to subdue her. In her weakened state, she had been transported in a shuttered cage across land and sea to the port of Ostia, then taken on a barge up the River Tiber to Rome. How terrifying must the crowded, noisy docks have seemed to this gentle animal reared in the tranquil expanses of the African plains?

Since then she had spent her days here at the vivarium in the Trans Tiberim\* district of the city, on the western bank of the Tiber. She had been trained to do tricks – to throw spears in the air, stand on upturned buckets, and fight bulls. And she'd had to get used to a much more crowded and noisy world than her old home. Her enclosure was a cage of closely spaced bars, just ten paces to a side. It was one of hundreds of similar cages in the vivarium, containing beasts from across the empire. To the elephant, it must seem a loud, smelly and terribly alien place. Did she ever think about what she had lost – the forests, the muddy lakes, the wide open spaces, and the herd she had left behind?

Lucius checked himself. It was a fault in him to get sentimental about the animals in his care. He had even gone so far as to give some of them names. (He'd

\* *vivarium*: a place where live animals are kept and raised. *Trans Tiberim*: Across the Tiber; the area is called *Trastevere* in modern Italian.

decided the elephant was called Magnentia.) He wished he could be more hard-hearted. After all, there were to be no happy endings for any of these beasts and he'd best get used to it. They had been brought here to Rome for one reason only: to perform, to fight and ultimately to die in the arena. In four days' time, the Inaugural Games of the Flavian Amphitheatre were due to begin. The night before, the animals of the Trans Tiberim Vivarium, and all the other vivaria dotted around the outskirts of the city, would be loaded into reinforced wagons and transported to underground vaults beneath the amphitheatre to await their debut in the show.

Lucius was about to give Magnentia another gentle prod when the door to the enclosure suddenly burst open. Silus, Lucius's boss, strode in. The beast master was a large, thickset man with a gleaming bald head, a thick beard and dark, angry eyes. As always, he clutched a coiled length of rope in his right hand – a bullwhip – ready to flick at any animal he felt like hurting at that particular moment. Silus enjoyed hurting animals – or so it seemed to Lucius. He used his whip randomly and without reason. He was violent, unpredictable, and all the animals were scared of him. As he came in, Magnentia trumpeted fearfully and bolted towards the far corner of the cage. In so doing, she knocked over the statue of Titus. It fell with a clatter to the floor and broke into half a dozen pieces.



'Stupid creature!' bawled Silus. He unfurled his whip and lashed her with it. The iron tip made a loud crack as it landed on her side. Magnentia bellowed with pain. He lashed her once again, and then a third time. Each time she roared her pain and tried to wedge herself further into the corner. Lucius cringed as he saw the dark red marks left on her skin.

Seemingly satisfied with the punishment he'd inflicted, Silus wiped the sweat from his brow, gathered up the whip and stuck it in his belt. 'The dumb brute has no idea how much it cost to get hold of that statue – nor what a crime she's just committed in breaking it.' He turned to Lucius. 'You, my lad, are going to have to repair it, even if it takes you the rest of the day. Understood? Have you got her to kneel before it yet?'

'Er... no, sir.'

Silus's nostrils flared impatiently. 'What in Jove's name is wrong with the animal? Those Numidians swore she was the most intelligent of the herd. And it's true she hurls weapons like no elephant we've ever had. And I've seen her kill two bulls with a single thrust of her ivories. So why won't she kneel?'

'She *does* kneel, sir,' said Lucius. 'Before you managed to find that statue, I'd get monkeys to crouch in front of her, and she'd kneel before them every time.'

'So she's prepared to submit to a monkey, but not to our emperor, is that what you're saying?' growled Silus. His hand moved to his whip – his automatic

response to anything that annoyed him. 'Maybe she needs to learn the price of such disrespect...'

'No, sir,' pleaded Lucius. 'I think she's learned that lesson already today. Just give me a bit more time. I'm sure I can get her to do this.'

'We don't have much more time, boy,' snarled Silus. 'In four days' time, the emperor will appear on his podium at the opening ceremony of the games, and this elephant must kneel before him. This is my gift to him, and if she doesn't do as I demand, I will personally disembowel her with a blunt knife and turn her tusks into toothpicks. Understood?'

TO BE CONTINUED...

## FIGHTERS IN THE GLADIATORIAL ARENA



### **Secutor, 'the Chaser'**

*Weapons:* gladius (short sword); dagger as back-up

*Shield:* large wooden rectangle

*Helmet:* full-face, smooth, egg-shaped.

*Armour:* padded or armoured guard on sword arm

*Opponent:* Retiarius; chasing the nimble Retiarius gives the Secutor his name



### **Eques, 'the Horseman'**

*Weapons:* lance, short sword

*Shield:* circular cavalry shield

*Helmet:* with brim, and decorated with feathers

*Armour:* shoulder guard

*Opponent:* another Eques

### **Paegniarius, 'the Comedian'**

*Weapons:* whip, wooden sword

*Shield:* small wooden board strapped to arm

*Helmet:* none

*Armour:* padded leg wrappings

*Opponent:* another Paegniarius; they are not serious fighters and always live to fight another day



### **Provocator, 'the Challenger'**

*Weapon:* gladius

*Shield:* large, rectangular; superior version of legionary issue

*Helmet:* all-encompassing, with grille-covered eyeholes for visibility

*Armour:* protective sleeve, greave protecting the forward leg, chest protector

*Opponent:* another Provocator



