# DEFENDERS

## DARK ARENA



TOM PALMER

The past is closer than Seth and Nadiya think ...



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TOM PALMER

With illustrations by
David Shephard



Gonkers

*For Amy and Hannah Manser,*
*a story about your city*




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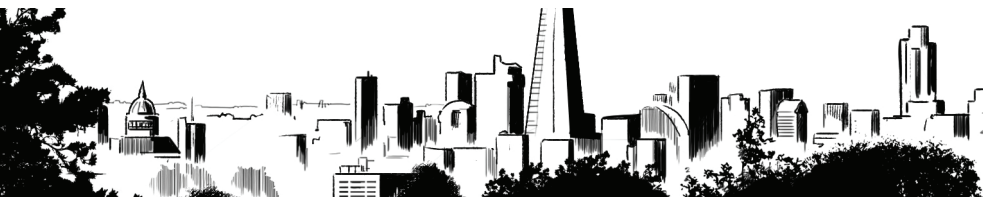
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They took in the scene below. A dense, dusty crowd of slaves poured from the amphitheatre. Among them were Roman soldiers in red cloaks and silver helmets, thrashing at the broken men with whips.

Seth turned from the dark arena. "We have to get away from here," he said. "Now."



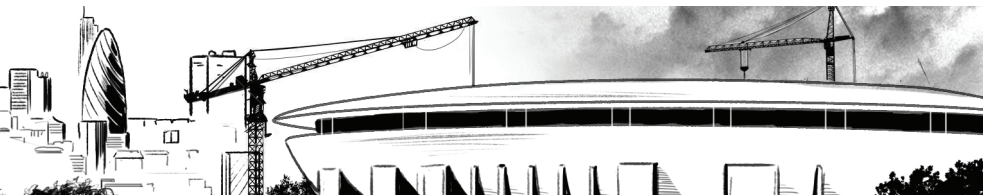


# 1

A hundred and twenty-five metres above the earth, the crane cab began to rock. Olga had a sudden lurch of unease. The day was clear and calm, and so she gazed across London to check everything was how it should be.

The River Thames was a silvery thread, widening as it flowed out to sea.

A carpet of buildings and parks and roads spread out in all directions.



A queue of aircraft heading towards Heathrow was a line of fairy lights connecting the capital of the UK to the rest of the world.

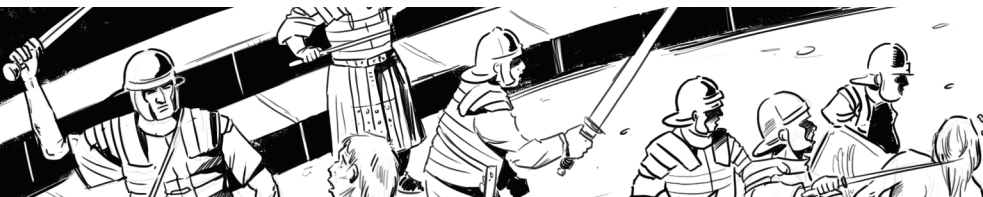
Everything was normal. Beautiful, even. And then Olga looked down.

That was when she saw them.

There were dozens.

A slow-moving mass of bodies, intent on their purpose. Their hair was long, their feet bare. Ragged clothes hung from their filthy bodies like sacks. Their faces were blackened with dirt, their skulls pressed against thin skin. Some had bloody gashes on their arms and legs. Each one was holding a heavy wooden weapon as they climbed steadily upwards.

They looked like a cast of zombies from the TV series that Olga and her husband were addicted to. Actors playing the part of the walking dead. But



these were no actors. In the window of her cab, Olga caught a reflection of her own eyes staring back at her, wild with fear.

What was this?

Who were they?

What did they want?

And now she could hear them. They were chanting some terrible rhythm of unknown words over and over again as they moved towards her.

Olga felt the strength drain from her. She put a hand to her mouth, feeling the burn of vomit in her throat. With her left hand, she leaned to press the emergency button, but she knew she had no chance of rescue before the mass of bodies reached her.

*

Minutes later, at the foot of the crane – the tallest



in England – a shocked huddle of workers in orange hard hats stood around the body of Olga Holub. The fall had smashed her flesh and bone and muscle into pieces – but her face was undamaged.

Her amber eyes stared up at the sky in terror, as if she had seen something beyond understanding before she fell.

