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Opening extract from

Timeriders: Gates of Rome

Written by

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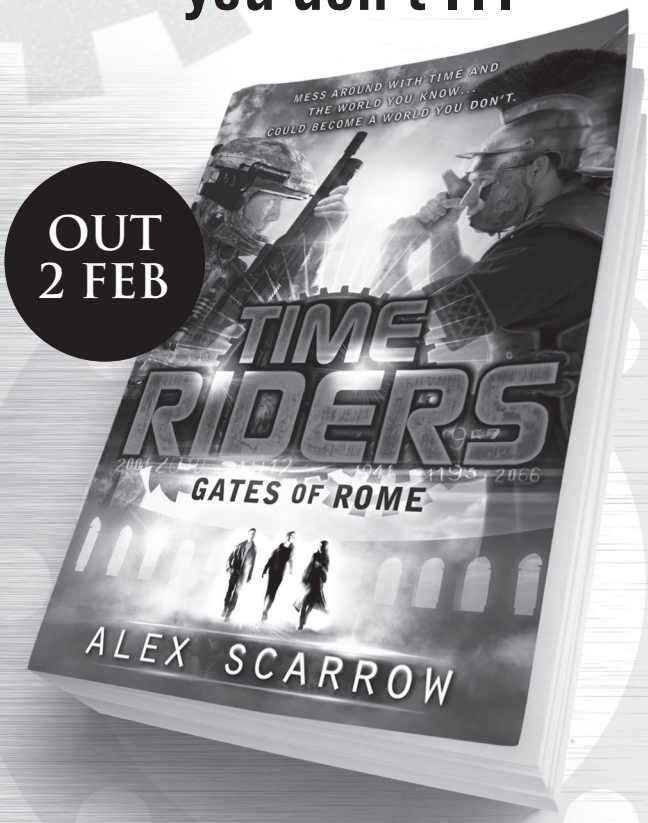
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OUT 2 FEB



GATES OF ROME

AD 37, Amphitheatrum Statilii Tauri, Rome

The workers had cleared away most of the bloody remains from the *ad bestia*. The last wretched lion had been put out of its misery and fresh dirt sprinkled over the largest coagulating puddles of blood. The crowd was clearly restless for the next round – *gladitorii meridiani* – to begin, a

fight between several sparring partners of convicted criminals. Man versus beast was one thing, but it was quite another to see two pairs of men fighting desperately for their lives. Particularly when it was well known that one of the convicts about to emerge into the arena was Vibius, the notorious child-strangler from the Esquilinus District.

Caligula rather fancied that if the man managed to survive his sparring partner he would put on some armour, come down to the pit and face the murderer himself. The crowd would love that. He smiled.

The plebs are so easily pleased, aren't they?

A roar of excitement began to roll round the amphitheatre as wooden gates opened, revealing a dark tunnel down to the underground bowels of the arena and a pair of Praetorian Guards leading out two rows of terrified-looking men: a wretched collection of specimens.

He was about to turn and ask his slave, Gnaelus, for his armour to be readied in case the mood to participate in finishing off any squirming survivors took him when he heard, faintly, over the hubbub of the impatient onlookers around the stalls of the amphitheatre, a soft, rhythmic thumping, almost like a distant battle drum.

His lean face knotted with curiosity. 'Gnaelus, can you hear that?'

The old slave nodded.

'Now what do you think *that* is?'

He cocked his head. 'Sounds like a marching drum, Caesar.'

Some other heads among the roaring crowd began to curiously turn one way then the other at the still faint but steadily increasing volume of that thumping.

The convicts meanwhile were now standing in the middle of the arena, the escort of Praetorian Guards withdrawing to the edges of the pit as a pair of slaves

passed out an assortment of weapons to the criminals. Their minds on the prospect of imminent violent death, none of them yet seemed to have registered the growing noise.

Caligula stood up and leaned against the railing of the imperial box. 'What is that?' he uttered. 'It really is getting quite irritating now.'

All of a sudden a flock of starlings fluttered and swooped across the sky above them, quite clearly startled by something. Heads all around the amphitheatre looked up at them, circling once above the arena and then fleeing over the walls and out of sight.

Caligula could hear the roar of impatient excitement for the next round giving way to a chaos of voices filled with curiosity and a growing anxiety at the noise and that sudden peculiar behaviour of the birds.

The thumping sound was now almost on

a par with the noise of the crowd, a deep, slow, regular pounding, like a heartbeat. Accompanied by something else now. It sounded like a horn. No. In fact . . . like nothing he'd ever heard before, a note increasing in pitch, getting higher and higher, more insistent, like a roaring wind whistling with growing intensity.

Up until now he was damned if he was going to display any unease or urgent curiosity like the rabble in the stalls around him. But this cacophony, the thumping so loud his chest was beginning to vibrate, this growing whistling, wailing sound . . .?

Then shrill screams.

He turned to where they were coming from and saw something loom over the top of the highest row of stalls, something large, the size of those curious, grey, lumbering beasts from Africa – two of them in fact. But it was all angles, corners, plated like armour and the drab colour of a muddy

river. It rose over the edge of the stalls and seemed to slide down just feet above the heads of panicking people fleeing their seats. Hovering – the air beneath it shimmering and churning like the air above a campfire.

The thudding was suddenly so much louder Caligula could hear what sounded like a voice shrieking and wailing like a man tormented by a thousand demons. He dropped to his knees behind the parapet, his eyes bulging with terror.

The giant thing, not alive, not any kind of animal . . . he sensed that now – some sort of vast flying chariot perhaps? – finally slid over the last stall and down on to the arena floor, whipping up swirling clouds of sand and dust.

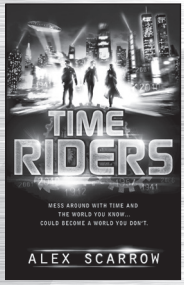
A second one of these leviathans appeared over the top wall of the amphitheatre, glided down across the stalls, now empty except for the writhing bodies of the trampled and wounded, finally coming to rest beside

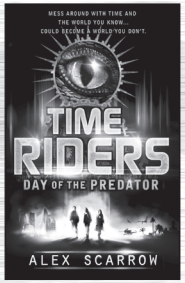
the first. Both olive-green leviathans were hovering a man's height off the ground, churning up storms of grit and sand into the thousands of terrified faces all around.

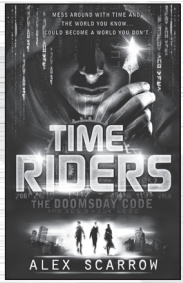
Finally the roaring wind sound began to drop in pitch and volume and both monsters settled gently on to the ground, the storm cloud of dust and sand settling around them. The deep booming thudding and the horrifying wailing continued, however, drowning out the hoarse screams of panic from all sides of the amphitheatre.

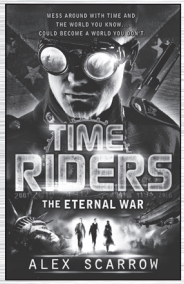


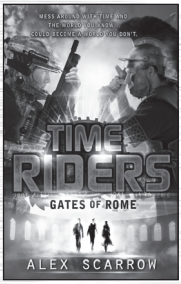
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