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Dan Scott

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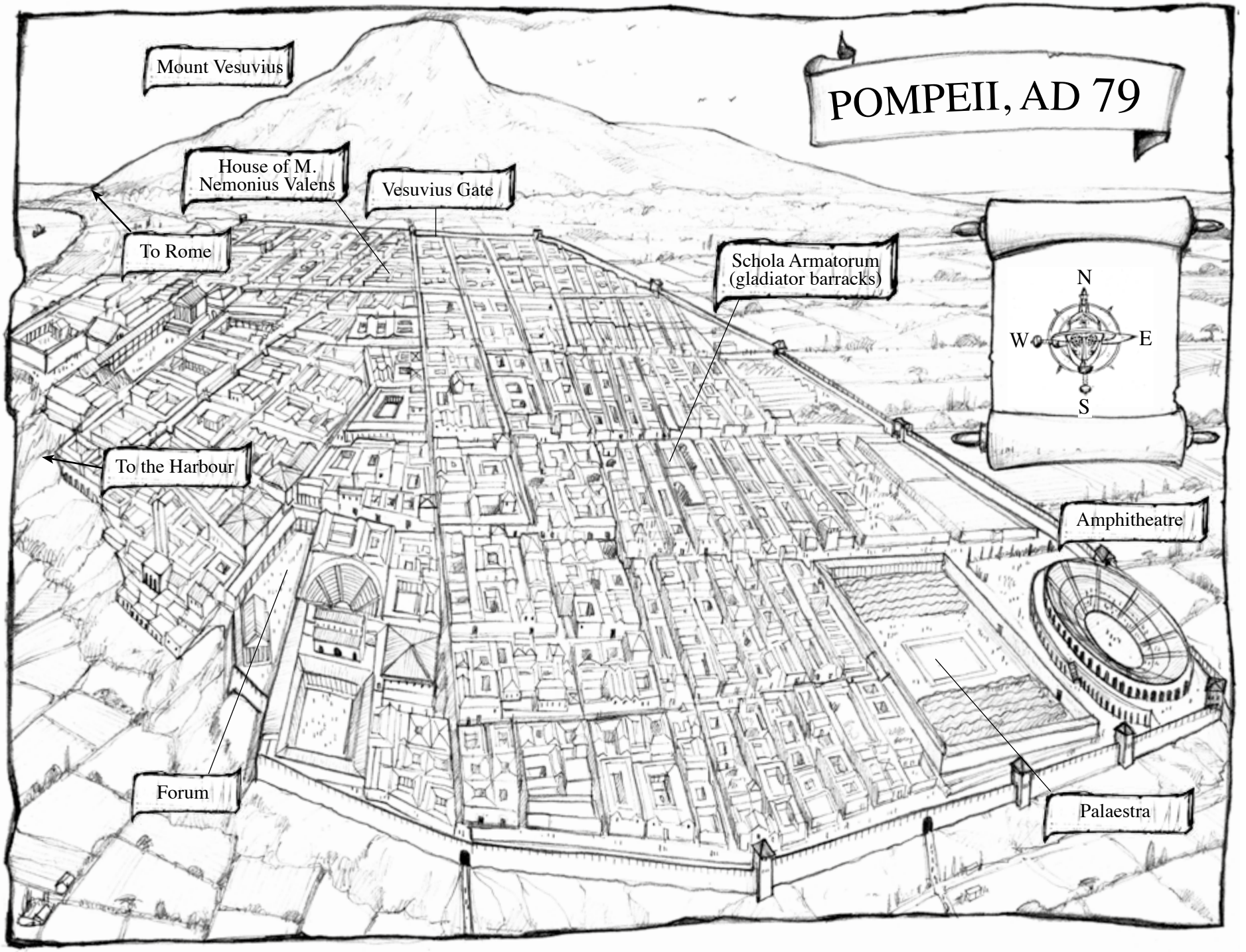
GLADIATOR SCHOOL

BOOK 2

BLOOD & FIRE

DAN SCOTT

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POMPEII, AD 79
Mount Vesuvius
House of M. Nemonius Valens
Vesuvius Gate
To Rome
Schola Armatorum (gladiator barracks)
N
W
E
S
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



ROME
AD 79

THE STORY SO FAR…

Until the age of thirteen, Lucius Valerius Aquila had led a happy, comfortable life as the middle child of a well-to-do Roman family. His father, Quintus Valerius Aquila, was a respected senator, and they lived in a luxurious villa in Rome.

All that changed one day in early July, AD 79. That was the day Lucius's father disappeared, just in time to avoid being arrested for treason. Lucius would never forget the sight of the soldiers marching into their house, searching through their personal belongings. The soldiers claimed that Aquila was the Spectre – a ruthless informer whose reports on private conversations had sent many people to their deaths under the previous emperor, Vespasian. Now the new emperor, Titus, was determined to end the practice of informing. Aquila had always hated informers, and Lucius was sure he was innocent. Yet everyone else – his own family included – seemed to be convinced that his father must be the Spectre.

With Aquila gone, along with all his money, Lucius and his family had to face the sudden loss of their home, wealth and status. Lucius's uncle, Gaius Valerius Ravilla, became their protector. He sold off their beautiful villa, their slaves and most of their possessions, and installed the family in a cramped flat above a smelly fast-food shop in an unfashionable part of Rome called Suburra. In these new surroundings, Lucius's mother Caecilia soon became a gloomy shadow of her former self, and his little sister Valeria grew ever more frustrated and irritable. But his older brother, Quintus Valerius Felix (known to his family as Quin), caused the biggest shock when he announced his intention to support the family by becoming a gladiator. This meant renouncing his citizenship and taking on slave status – but Quin, who loved the guts and glory of the arena, relished the prospect. He persuaded their uncle Ravilla to give him a try-out at his gladiator school.

Lucius, like Aquila, had always hated the games. He was desperately worried that Quin would be killed. So, hoping to keep an eye on his brother, he got himself a job at the gladiator school, cleaning the gladiators' rooms and running errands for the school's lanista (trainer), Crassus. The work was both strenuous and dull. His only consolation was his budding friendship with an Egyptian slave girl called Isidora, who also worked at the school.

Quin adored his new life as part of the school's familia (troupe) of gladiators, and made rapid progress with his training. Lucius found it hard to share in Quin's elation. He missed his father intensely and longed for a return to their former life. One day, to his great surprise and joy, he received a secret, mysteriously worded message in his father's handwriting. Not long afterwards, Rufus, a new fighter at the school, revealed himself as Aquila's personal slave. He told Lucius that Aquila had been forced into hiding by the allegations made against him. Aquila knew where proof of his innocence could be found, and he needed Lucius to help him get hold of it, as he could not risk returning to Rome himself. Rufus promised to lead Lucius to his father the next day, after his fight.

Unfortunately, Ravilla was secretly listening in to this conversation. As Lucius later found out, Ravilla hated his brother Aquila and was glad that he'd been forced into exile. The last thing he wanted was for Lucius to prove Aquila's innocence. Ravilla – who had been known to illegally fix some fights so that he could win bets on the outcome – had ordered Rufus to lose this one, but had promised to spare him from death. The following day, Rufus lost his fight in the arena as planned, but Ravilla jabbed his thumb sideways – the sign for death. Lucius was forced to look on helplessly as the victorious gladiator killed Rufus, the only man who knew where his father was.

PROLOGUE

FIRST BLOOD

ROME
10 AUGUST AD 79



'Games 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