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Blood and Sand

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CHAPTER I

1 MARCH



When he was alone again with Magnentia, Lucius went over to her and gently stroked her enormous ear, something that always seemed to comfort her. She made a snuffling sound and leaned in against him. Close up, her tusks were huge and yellow, and sharp as spears. He'd seen her gore bulls with them, but he wasn't scared – she was always gentle when she wasn't fighting for her life.

He went to the stable and fetched a large bucket of water. From a shelf stocked with herbs and medicines, he found what he needed. While Magnentia sucked noisily from the wooden bucket with her trunk, Lucius tenderly dabbed at her wounds with a cloth soaked in

terebinth resin, then smeared them with soothing aloe vera cream.

'What are we going to do with you, my girl?' he murmured. 'How are we going to get you to do this one simple task?'

Lucius remembered the words of an old elephant trainer from the East (a 'mahout', as they call them over there), who had been working at the vivarium when Lucius first arrived. 'A good elephant keeper', he said, 'has to slip into the elephant's skin. He has to feel and behave as an elephant does.'

Lucius was wondering how it might be possible to slip into an elephant's skin when the door to the enclosure opened again. This time it was his friend and co-worker, Isidora. She was small, tough and wiry, having lived all her thirteen years as a slave. She and Lucius had worked together at the gladiator school until last winter, when Ravilla, who also part-owned the vivarium, decided, quite suddenly, to move them there.

Isidora took one look at the broken statue and the scars on Magnentia, and sighed. 'Silus has paid you a visit, then?'

Lucius nodded.

'And Magnentia still won't kneel before the emperor?'

'No, for some reason she won't.'

Isidora started to giggle, then stopped when she noticed Lucius's frown. 'I'm sorry, but I find it hard to

take all this very seriously. You Romans like to make gods of men and expect animals to worship them. In Egypt we know that it's the animals who are the gods. Your emperor should kneel before Magnentia!'

'You must find this whole set-up pretty grotesque in that case?' said Lucius.

'You mean rearing animals for slaughter for the entertainment of the masses? Yes, I do.' Isidora's velvety brown eyes flashed with anger. 'But it's the Roman way, isn't it? You're never content simply to rule. You constantly have to prove your power – over people, over nature. And thousands of innocent animals will have to die for the sake of your arrogance.'

Lucius was used to Isidora's anti-Roman rants. Perhaps she was right, but he wasn't going to give her the pleasure of hearing him say it. Besides, the Romans had done some good as well, hadn't they? He hadn't heard Egyptians complain too much about the roads, the baths and the temples the Romans had built for them, nor the security the Roman legions provided for their merchants and traders.

Crouching down in the dust, Lucius picked up Titus's arm and tried to fit it back onto his shoulder. 'I'm going to have to find some glue from somewhere,' he muttered, getting up.

'I'll come with you,' said Isidora. 'Farewell, Magnentia, you big, brave beauty.' She waved at the elephant, and the two of them left the enclosure and began walking down one of the long aisles that

separated the various animal pens and cages in the vivarium. From behind the barred walls came all manner of sounds: snuffles, snorts, growls, barks, hisses, howls, roars and almost human screams.

Lucius had been working at the vivarium for several weeks now, but had not yet got used to the constant cacophony, nor the sheer range of wildlife that had been collected here from the furthest reaches of the empire. It seemed that almost every day a new shipment of exotic beasts arrived on the barges that came up the Tiber, and Lucius could only marvel at the imagination of the gods in devising all these strange and varied forms. He'd met a few of them before, such as the crocodile, lion and giraffe he'd seen at Valens's menagerie in Pompeii. But he had not been prepared for the sight of animals with humps on their backs (Isidora told him they were camels), monkeys with the heads of dogs (baboons, she called them), spotted dogs called hyenas that laughed as if you'd just cracked a rude joke, snakes as long as Silus's bullwhip and as thick as a gladiator's thigh, and rhinos – enormous armour-plated beasts with horns on their noses.

Isidora seemed to take it all in her stride, yet not a day went by when she wasn't complaining about something or other. If she wasn't grumbling about Rome 'stealing' the crocodiles, hippos, camels and baboons from Egypt, she was blaming the 'cruel and incompetent' trappers and traders for the weakened state of the poor animals when they arrived.

'Sometimes I wish we were back at the gladiator school,' she remarked to Lucius as they walked along the aisle. 'I find it easier to watch people hurting each other than hurting animals.'

'The gladiators have no more freedom than the animals,' Lucius pointed out.

'No, but at least they understand the situation they're in. These dumb beasts will go to their deaths in a state of fear and bewilderment... Ravilla knows how horrible it is here at the vivarium. I think he sent us here as a warning.'

'What sort of warning?' asked Lucius, surprised. His uncle had been remarkably friendly lately. Perhaps this wasn't surprising, as everything appeared to be going his way. Valens, the only man with the power to destroy him, had perished during the eruption at Pompeii. Aquila, Ravilla's hated brother, languished helplessly in exile. Meanwhile, the emperor had handed Ravilla a senior role in the organisation of the Inaugural Games. Ravilla's star was definitely on the rise, which would account for the thin-lipped smile Lucius found fixed to his uncle's face whenever he saw him these days.

'He wants to demonstrate that he has complete power over us,' said Isidora. 'He knows you overheard his conversation with Valens – that you know he's the Spectre – and he assumes you've told me about it. By sending us here, he's saying: "Look, I can change your life in an instant. And if you ever even think of

crossing me, your fate will be no better than one of these animals.'"

Lucius had told Isidora everything that had happened in Pompeii. It was typical of her to take the bleakest view.

'How can Ravilla know that I heard him?' he asked.

'He overheard Quin mumbling about it during his fever, didn't he? Or Crassus could have told him.'

Appius Seius Crassus was the lanista at the Ludus Romanus, so he was quite close to Ravilla. Lucius had forgotten that he'd told Crassus about the conversation – and, of course, it was possible that Crassus had passed this on to Ravilla during one of their private meetings. Still, he wasn't convinced that Isidora's theory was correct. It was far more likely that Ravilla had sent them to the vivarium for the simple reason that they were needed there. The animals were arriving thick and fast, and the staff needed all the help they could get with feeding and caring for them.

A low growl to their right made Isidora pause. The most dangerous animals were housed in a double-walled enclosure – a cage placed within a timber surround. 'How's Kato these days?' Lucius asked warily.

'I don't know,' Isidora replied, her voice now thick with anxiety. 'He's better than he was, but still poorly.'

Kato was an injured tiger that Isidora was trying to nurse back to health. The trappers who'd caught him in the forests bordering the Caspian Sea had injured his

left forepaw, which had then become infected during the journey to Rome. Silus, typically, had wanted to destroy him – he couldn't see the point in feeding and caring for what was clearly a dying animal. But Isidora had persuaded him to wait a further week to see if the tiger recovered. The week was due to end tomorrow.

'It took me three days just to get him to trust me, so I've only just started treating the wound. Come in and take a look at him if you like. Actually, do you mind waiting a moment while I change his dressing?'

Lucius followed her through the outer door. Through the bars of the cage, he saw the rear end of the tiger protruding from a wooden shelter. It had orange fur with black stripes, except for the tail, which was black and white, and flicked weakly.

Isidora took a roll of linen bandage and a small clay pot from a shelf near the outer door. The saliva dried in Lucius's mouth as he watched her pass through the inner door into the tiger's cage.

'You're not wearing any protection,' he croaked. It was an unwritten rule followed by everyone at the vivarium that you always put leather coverings on your arms and legs before coming into contact with a dangerous animal.

'They restrict my movements,' said Isidora.

Lucius watched, heart in mouth, as she closed the cage door behind her and went down on her hands and knees. 'This is the only way he'll let me touch him,' she said. 'I have to behave like I'm another tiger.'

She began to crawl very slowly towards Kato, keeping her head bowed in a gesture of submission. Tentatively, she reached out and stroked his haunch. The tail flicked in surprise.

Lucius stepped back in fright as the muscles beneath the orange fur began to ripple like the fire he'd once seen surging down Mount Vesuvius. The hind limbs stretched taut and the powerful animal climbed with terrifying swiftness to his feet. His spine curved as flexibly as a snake's as he twisted around, and suddenly his enormous head appeared at the entrance to his shelter. Kato's white-furred chin, calm green eyes and wide face reminded Lucius of something noble and kingly, making him reflect that perhaps the Egyptian tradition of animal worship was not so strange after all. Then the tiger's mouth opened wide, revealing a vicious set of teeth, and the godlike creature was abruptly transformed into a merciless killer. He could have decapitated Isi then and there with one casual bite. But the frightening display was merely a yawn, and soon his mouth shrank to something more like a grin. A large pink tongue played across his teeth and he let out another low growl. Isidora didn't flinch. She kept her head low to the ground.

Lucius could see the tiger wasn't quite balanced. All of his front-body weight was on his right leg. A dirty bandage covered his left paw, which hung limply in the air. With admirable calm and dexterity, Isidora began undoing the knot at the top of the bandage

before slowly unwinding it. Kato seemed content to let her do her work. He licked his lips, and his growl was almost like a deep purr. When she'd removed the old bandage, she peered underneath the paw. 'It's looking a little better today,' she said.

Lucius watched in fear and wonder as four long claws, like curved dagger blades, emerged from the paw. 'One swipe with those and you're dead meat, you know that?' he whispered.

Isidora uttered a nervous chuckle. 'You don't need to remind me!'

Still maintaining her submissive posture, she pulled out the stopper of the clay jar with her teeth, then dipped her finger into the clear, amber-coloured substance it contained. 'Honey,' she murmured. 'My mother used to swear by it as a healer of infected wounds.' She pressed her finger to the dark gash beneath Kato's paw. He flinched. His eyes widened and he slashed with his claws. Isidora jerked her hand back, but slightly too late. Lucius saw a line of red appear on the flesh between her thumb and forefinger.

'Get out!' he cried. 'Get out of there now!'

'No, it's OK,' insisted Isidora, quickly tearing off some cloth from the roll and winding it around her wounded hand. 'He's just reacting to the pain. He'll be fine now.'

Deftly, she wound some more of the cloth roll around his paw and secured it with a knot. This time,

Kato didn't resist. Within a few minutes Isidora was safely out of the cage.

'Are you sure you're OK?' Lucius asked her.

'Fine,' she reassured him. She raised the hem of her tunic and showed him a long, shallow scar on her thigh. 'That happened on my *first* visit to his cage,' she explained. 'It's just a matter of getting used to each other. He's learning about me, and I'm learning about him. This time was my fault. I was probably a bit too forceful, and then too slow in getting out of the way.'

A loud shriek from further along the aisle made them both look up. A chimpanzee went bounding past them, nearly knocking Lucius over as it went.

'Don't just stand there!' bellowed Silus, coming up fast behind it and brandishing his bullwhip. 'Stop that blasted monkey!'

Obediently, Lucius began chasing the chimp down the long aisle. It lolloped along on all fours in its ungainly style, frequently looking back over its shoulder as it ran, baring its teeth and screeching, as if daring Lucius to catch it. There seemed little hope of that. It leapt at the bars of the antelope enclosure and clambered upwards with astonishing agility. Then it stood up on the roof of the enclosure, puffed out its chest, raised its long arms and hooted at Lucius, making the boy feel as if he was being cursed and mocked and jeered all at the same time.

'Get him down!' grunted the breathless Silus when he caught up with him. 'I want that monkey now, d'you

hear? I'm going to flay him alive and then chop off his head and feed his brains to the hyenas. I'm going to use his skull as a soup bowl. Look at this!'

He held up his left hand. The bite mark showed clearly in the flesh of his palm. 'I was giving the wretched thing a well-deserved beating and this is what he did to me. Then he scarpered through the open door of the cage.' He raised his eyes to the chimp, which was now scampering manically about on the roof of the cage, still yelling and hooting at them. 'You may well laugh now, you hairy little demon, but you'll be crying for mercy by the time I'm finished with you!'

'Why did you beat him?' Isidora wanted to know.

'What sort of a question is that?' Silus snarled, his eyes narrowing dangerously on her innocent-looking face. 'I don't need reasons to beat those in my charge – and that goes for slaves, by the way, as well as animals. I'll beat anyone who thinks they've got the better of old Silus. Tried to steal my whip, didn't he? – when my back was turned. Steal it right out of my belt. And he very nearly succeeded! But old Silus was too quick for him!' He raised his head and repeated this to the chimp at the top of his voice: 'Too quick for you, wasn't I, you hairy gorgon?'* Returning his attention to Isidora, he added: 'I caught the whip with one hand and grabbed the monkey by the scruff of the neck with the other. Then I beat him soundly… No less

* *gorgon: a mythical monster: a woman with snakes for hair. Anyone who sees her face is turned to stone.*

than you deserved!' he bawled at the chimp. 'And I'd have carried on beating him for a good while longer if he hadn't suddenly leapt up and sunk his banana-chompers into me.'

Isidora tried to stifle her giggles behind her hand, but Silus spotted this and turned on her menacingly with his bullwhip. 'Back to your duties, girl, if you don't want to feel the sting of this crop across your hide.' She moved away, but only as far as a small crowd of fellow workers who had gathered in the aisle – this kind of entertainment was too rare to miss out on.

'What are *you* standing there gaping at?' Silus yelled at Lucius. 'Fetch a ladder from the storeroom and get him down from that roof.'

Five minutes later, Lucius was making his way unsteadily up a rickety ladder, to the sniggers of the watching crowd. The chimp grew ever more noisy and agitated the closer he came. When he reached the roof, Lucius stretched out and tried to grab the animal's leg. The chimp leapt clear and howled its indignation, then took off across the roof of the cage in the same quick, lolloping style, using its long arms just like another pair of legs.

'Get after him!' screamed Silus, and Lucius did. When the chimp sprang nimbly across a gap three paces wide to land on the roof of the next cage, Lucius gasped and slowed, but was soon roused by distant threats of violence from Silus if he didn't get a move on. Taking a deep breath, he sprinted across the rest of

the roof and took off into space. For a second he was flying, to the gasps of the watchers below. Then, to his huge relief, he felt the impact of the next cage roof reverberating through the soles of his sandals. He'd made it! But he'd landed closer to the edge than he realised, and a small stumble backwards nearly sent him toppling to his doom. Desperately he windmilled his arms to try and regain his balance.

He managed it – just – and took off once again after his quarry. The hairy little figure had, by now, leapt another gap. Lucius gulped and followed him with another run and leap, this time landing more deftly. But the chimp, it seemed, was always one gap ahead, and by the time Lucius had vaulted a third aisle, the animal was scrambling up the stone outer wall of the vivarium.

Within seconds the chimp had reached the top. He stood tall there for a moment, beating his chest triumphantly and making cacophanous whoops at Lucius, before swiftly disappearing over the far side.

'Where's he gone?' a breathless Silus demanded from below, white spit now flecking his beard.

'He's escaped over the wall,' Lucius gasped.

'The outer wall?'

Lucius grimaced and nodded. The ape was now running free through the city streets.