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GLADIATOR SCHOOL

BOOK 4

BLOOD VENGEANCE

DAN
SCOTT

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CHAPTER I

12 SEPTEMBER



'There's nothing like the feeling of living from second to second,' Quin explained to Lucius, 'surrendering yourself to Neptune, the god of our noble sport. You can keep all your history and philosophy, brother. They'll never take you to the essence of what life's about so well as racing chariots.'

'They'll never cut your feet to ribbons either,' observed Lucius drily.

They were in the all-too-familiar setting of a medical room – Quin seemed to spend a lot of time in such places. This one was part of the stadium complex and dedicated to treating injured charioteers. Quin was sitting on a bench, having his feet cleaned and

bandaged by Glaukos, the White team's surgeon. Lucius had come here directly after the race, preferring to be with Quin rather than listen to his father and Canio gossiping with their senatorial colleagues in the stands. He couldn't help staring at the many scars on his brother's muscular torso, the legacy of his short, yet violent career as gladiator, bestiarius and now charioteer.

'This is the life,' sighed Quin. His blue eyes sparkled happily. 'All the drama and excitement of the gladiatorial arena – and nobody has to get killed.'

'Nine people died today,' Lucius pointed out.

'Yeah, well – accidents happen,' shrugged Quin. 'But the deaths were incidental – they weren't part of the entertainment.'

'So why can't they make it safer?' Lucius asked.

'If it was safe, no one would want to come and watch.'

'And I'd be out of a job,' muttered Glaukos.

Aquila came in, followed by Canio.

'Congratulations, Quintus,' said Aquila stiffly. Lucius had hoped that Quin's heroics this afternoon might have softened Aquila's antipathy towards his son's chosen sport – but there was no trace of a smile on his face.

'You were the moral victor today, young sir,' Canio declared. 'Everyone's saying so.'

'Which is another way of saying that I wasn't the actual victor,' chuckled Quin.

'Sadly not,' said Canio, 'though you may have

accidentally invented a new sport. When your father and I left the stadium, the intermission acrobats were already mimicking your standing-on-horseback riding style. It's becoming quite a hit.'

'Pleased to hear it!' said Quin. 'So, Father, have I succeeded in opening your eyes to the joys of chariot racing?'

Aquila frowned and shook his head. He was tall, like his elder son, but with a leaner frame. His years of study had left him with a slight stoop and the permanent squint of a man with poor eyesight. 'To be frank with you, I was quite baffled by the whole thing. How all those thousands of people can get so worked up at the sight of men driving chariots around in circles is a mystery to me. If it was about the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the charioteers, that would be one thing. But as far as I can tell, their love affair is with a certain bit of coloured cloth. So long as a man wearing their favoured colour crosses the line before every other man, they're happy. It's quite ludicrous, Quintus, and it's high time you put aside these childish pursuits and began taking life more seriously.'

His words brought a flush of anger to Quin's cheeks. 'These childish pursuits, as you call them, are all I ever want to do,' he retorted. 'You know I have no interest in your boring world of politics and debate.'

Lucius cringed. This was a common argument between the two of them at home, and he didn't relish it being replayed here in front of Canio and Glaukos.

'Remember who you are, Quintus,' said Aquila. 'You're a Valerius, a member of a venerable, aristocratic family with ancestors that can be traced back to –'

'To the early Republic,* I know,' interrupted Quin. 'And so what? When you left us, we lost everything. And what did our venerable, aristocratic name count for then? Nothing! It didn't buy us food or put a roof over our heads. The only practical path in life is to be true to yourself, and to survive on your merits – not on your name.'

'He's starting to sound like one of those Cynic philosophers,'** chuckled Canio.

But Aquila wasn't amused. 'I've indulged your fantasies for too long, Quintus. I came today because you begged me to, but I shall never set foot in the Circus Maximus again, and neither shall you. You must give up chariot racing immediately, or I will cut off your allowance, and you can find somewhere else to live.'

Quin's jaw dropped open in shock. 'But Father, do you have any idea how much a charioteer earns? Are you going to cast me back into poverty?'

Aquila was unmoved. 'You said you wished to survive on your merits, not on your name. Well, that's exactly what you'll have to do.'

* *Republic: Rome became a republic – a state with an elected government – around 509 BC. In 27 BC, Augustus became the first emperor of Rome, and the republic ended. So Lucius's family is nearly 600 years old.*

** *Cynic philosophers: ancient Greek scholars who believed in leading a simple and virtuous life, without ambitions or worldly goods.*

Before Quin could think of a response to this, Aquila's secretary, a freedman* named Timon, entered. He was a thin man with a quick, nervous manner. 'Patrone,** there is someone outside who wishes to speak with you.'

'If it's a client, tell him to come along tomorrow morning for the salutatio,'*** snapped Aquila. 'He can wait his turn along with everyone else.'

Timon hesitated. 'It's not a client, sir. He says the matter is urgent. It concerns…' Glancing around at the others in the room, the secretary broke off. He moved closer to Aquila and whispered something in his ear.

Aquila paled. His forehead creased in alarm. 'In that case,' he said, 'show him in.'

The man who entered on Timon's ushering seemed ancient, yet somehow ageless. His wiry brown body was clothed in a Greek-style himation – a large cloth draped over his left shoulder and about his body – the typical attire of a wandering philosopher or mystic. He had a wrinkled face, a thick grey beard and topaz eyes that seemed to glitter with mysterious secrets. On seeing him, the surgeon Glaukos, who had just finished bandaging Quin, gasped and rose to his feet.

* *freedman: an ex-slave who has been set free (manumitted) by his master or mistress as a reward for good service.*

** *Patrone: master, protector.*

*** *client: a person who receives or hopes for support or favours from an important Roman citizen; salutatio: a morning visit paid by a client to his patron.*