

Prologue

Seth opened his eyes. The unbearable tremors had stopped. He sat up warily. No excruciating pain in his limbs. No dizziness. No crashing headache. The fever was completely gone.

He swung his legs carefully to the side of the thin mat he lay on, and looked around his shadowy cell. It was just as it should be – low wooden table littered with medicinal herbs and vials, fresh water in a cup. He squinted his eyes against the flickering light of a burning oil lamp. Its aura shimmered with a surprising prism of colours, unnerving him a little.

‘Matt?’ he called.

He expected his voice to come out husky and spent, but it sounded pure and full. He stood up – his legs felt strong. He walked over to the door. It was open.

Strange.

He moved out into the narrow passageway.

Empty.

The gladiatorial barracks should be throbbing with noise. Where was everyone?

He ran to Matthias’s cell.

Also empty. A tunic lay across his mattress, and a pestle and

mortar with some semi-crushed medication stood abandoned on the table by the small window.

Seth walked across to the window and looked out. Again, that strange spectrum of coloured light shimmering around the edges of the eerily empty practice arena. He glanced across it towards the gates. Where were the guards? They never left their post.

Without another thought, he fled from the building, across the deserted arena until he reached the huge wooden gates. Glancing behind him, he gave them an almighty shove. They clanked open. He slipped through quickly, before the sound could betray him, and continued to run, certain his captors wouldn't be far behind.

He knew where he was heading: their secret meeting place. He pictured her standing in the shadows of the trees. Waiting for him.

Livia. His Livia.

And then he froze, because he suddenly remembered. She wouldn't be there. Couldn't be there. She was gone forever.

He had watched her die.

PART I

Time is too slow for those who wait,
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for those who grieve,
Too short for those who rejoice,
But for those who love, time is eternity.

— Henry van Dyke (1852–1933)

Delinquent

York, England

AD 2012

‘Eva, what is your problem?’

I shrugged. Where to begin?

‘So what were you doing when you were supposed to be at school?’

‘Er – this and that.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

Really? Do you really want to know, Dad?

‘Eva, what is going to happen to you?’ Mum had finally joined the party.

How the hell did I know what was going to happen to me? But thanks, Mum, for reminding me that I had no future, and that you would always side with *him*.

I stared back at them. My mother and my stepfather, Colin. All I needed now was darling Ted to show up (his son, *not* my brother), to make it three against one.

‘I’m so sick of this, Eva,’ said Colin. ‘Get out! I don’t want to look at you –’

‘The feeling’s mutual,’ I muttered as I shoved past him and stormed off to my room.

My first instinct was to pick up my guitar, turn up the amp and scream. But I didn’t trust myself. I loved my guitar too much – it was my dad’s – and all I wanted to do was smash something. I tried to get my breathing under control, but the rage was building. I needed to get out. I grabbed my jacket and slammed out of the house.

Then I ran . . . through the town, across the park, down the hill to the river. I ran along the path, ignoring the joggers, dog walkers, inevitable wolf whistles – I could shut out anything when I put my mind to it – until gradually the red suffocating heat started to subside, and I began to feel calmer.

I even managed a small humourless chuckle. Because for once Colin did have a genuine reason for being freaked.

I had been expelled *again*.

And I’d read enough to know that two expulsions meant you were pretty well washed up. And even though I hadn’t turned up at school for weeks I couldn’t help feeling this huge void opening up in front of me. My future.

My stomach churned. It was pretty scary being sixteen and washed up.

The last thing I wanted was to think about my life and how I’d got to this point. I just needed to keep running and block it all out, but my brain would not stop fizzing away uncontrollably.

My brain.

My brain was definitely at the core of the problem. The number of times I’d wished I was normal. But had I ever been normal? Happy? Like other kids?

I could only really remember when things started to unravel . . . when I realized that a gift could be a curse.

How old was I? About six, probably. My dad had been dead, I don't know – nearly a year, I guess . . . And although Mum's months of continuous crying were finally over her interest in me remained . . . intermittent. So I had plenty of time to amuse myself.

On this particular day, the TV was on as usual – Mum had shoved the remote in my hand and told me to stay put. But I'd had enough of TV. I'd read everything there was to read in the house (OK – she didn't have a lot of books) and I was bored.

I looked out of the window. Mum was in the garden, lying on a recliner, her eyes shut. I remember pressing my face to the window, willing her to look up and notice me. But of course she didn't. As I reluctantly turned away, I caught sight of her open laptop on the table. I wandered over to it and touched a key. It blinked into life. It was open on a web page: my mum had been ordering some wine. Wine wasn't very interesting to a six-year-old, but I had watched my mum typing so I had got the gist of the mechanics. I had also, it turned out, photographically memorized quite a lot of what Mum had typed – like her bank details, her PIN and password. Within a couple of hours I had done a bit of shopping myself.

I was delighted when a few days later twenty-five packs of Dolly Mixtures, a hundred bottles of lemonade, a Labrador puppy and three Siamese kittens arrived. My mother was *not* delighted. Although I happily confessed to the shopping, she didn't believe me, assuming she'd been the victim of some identity theft mess-up.

I wasn't allowed to keep any of my purchases, so I didn't do

that again, but I'd discovered an awesome new world, a world where I had total control. To a small, lonely, powerless child this was mind-blowing.

By the time I was eight I could hack my way through most data security codes and firewalls, and although nobody had the least suspicion about what I was doing, I had the sense to cover my tracks pretty well. By then I knew that this activity wasn't strictly legal. But my motives were pure: I just enjoyed cracking codes – they fascinated me. I wasn't interested in people's secrets, their data, their financial status; I just got a buzz breaking open locked doors.

Needless to say, I wasn't that good around other eight-year-olds. Barbies just didn't do it for me. I liked the idea of having friends; I longed to have friends actually. I just couldn't fake normality well enough. I didn't understand that kids wouldn't want me to mathematically predict the outcome of any playground game before they started playing. Or that the whole point of The Memory Game was that you *didn't* remember what was on the reverse of every card. Pretty soon I stopped getting asked to play.

School was mostly excruciating. I sat for hour after endless hour listening to old facts and obsolete ideas. And things weren't much better at home . . . Colin just about endured me while Ted seemed to loathe me more each day.

I had dreamed of running away loads of times, but didn't really know how, so for several years I made do with virtual escape – I could customize any computer with undetectable pirated games, and found a lot of comfort in becoming someone else, someone with power, someone who could conquer legions of mythical enemies. The games became my *real* life.

They kept me sane . . . till I discovered an even more exciting world.

I was about eleven and had finally started bunking school. Not intentionally at first. One Monday morning I just couldn't bring myself to get off the bus at the school stop and by the Thursday I'd discovered the town library: banks of computers, shelves of books, nobody hassling you. How had this oasis managed to stay such a well-kept secret from me? It became my paradise. Day after day I sat in an inconspicuous corner, devouring information: the disintegration of Stalinism; social organization in Roman Britain; Russian; Latin; Greek; quantum theory; random genetics . . . just about anything and everything turned me on. When I got home, I'd continue my reading online until someone came in. Then I'd quickly erase my history, log out, shut down and put the tv on.

I genuinely believed I'd get away with it. I thought I'd covered all bases. I'd researched drawn-out illnesses with symptoms I could fairly easily fake, and forged a letter to the school from my mother claiming I had ME and needed to be excused indefinitely.

I used the same story when the librarian eventually challenged me. I thought she'd swallowed it. I'd even begun to trust her enough to have a couple of conversations about the Canadian legal system (she was Canadian), but she turned out to be a *total traitor*.

Three months after I entered paradise I was to be cast out again. One minute I was completely absorbed in a *Lancet* article about stem-cell research, the next minute I was being tapped on the shoulder by some appalling welfare officer.

For two hours I refused to speak. I knew that once I told them my name they'd call my parents and send me back to

school. Unfortunately, when you're only eleven and you haven't received training in SAS counter-torture techniques, you don't stand up well to interrogation. I caved. I was taken home to Mum and Colin (massive row) and they sent me back to school. I received my first official warning.

This meant that if I did anything else *really bad* I would get kicked out of school.

My heart lifted! All I had to do now was come up with something big enough to get expelled. I began researching and plotting.

It turns out there's an actual list of expellable offences. Truancy (Number Six) I had successfully completed. I just had to choose my second crime. I drew the line at violence, bullying or supplying drugs. But Offence Number Seven was made for me – computer hacking! The main challenge was making it blindingly obvious that I was the only suspect.

It was quite a lot of fun. I got into the head teacher's email account and composed the perfect letter of resignation, which I mailed to everyone on the board of governors and to each member of staff. Then I sent out an email alert to all the pupils, advising them that school had been cancelled for the rest of the week. I left a neat, easy-to-follow trail back to my own login account, and four days later I was summoned. After submitting to an hour's worth of rant, I skipped out of the school and never looked back.

Actually, although I never looked back, looking forward didn't turn out to be that much better. Because the head teacher's fury was like a sneeze compared to my parents' anger. I was grounded for a week and then they packed me off to Downley Comprehensive . . .

Surprisingly, Downley Comp was OK at first. It was big, anonymous, and had enough disruptive pupils to keep the focus off me. I managed to be quietly invisible for nearly three years.

But sadly, when I hit fourteen, stray interest began to be a problem.

As if my life wasn't awkward enough, I had just started to develop *Disability Number Two*.

2

Escape

York, England

AD 2012

For some reason I suddenly lost my invisibility cloak. I had been working on being inconspicuous for so long that I almost believed I was invisible. I walked in the shadows, didn't make conversation, sat at the back, avoided all eye contact, but gradually I became aware of people looking at me. Boys started asking me stuff, inviting me to weekend events.

A small, buried part of me really wanted the company, wanted to go with them, but an instinct told me it wasn't safe. They would find me out. So I tried ignoring them. They just persisted. I tried acerbic rudeness. They just laughed as though I was flirting. I cut my hair really short, and started wearing baggy clothes. Nothing worked. My distance seemed to just make them more avid. Then when Jason Drummond chucked Sophie Scott, saying he fancied me more, the girls stopped ignoring me too. Instead, they started to actively hate me. En masse. And girl bullying is no fun.

It was definitely time to leave.

I'd hoped I wouldn't need to resort to expulsion again. It was, after all, legal to leave school at sixteen. But I'd made the mistake of getting a bunch of A* GCSEs. I had radically improved Downley Comp's exam stats, and they were counting on my A-level results to do the same. So when I told the head I was leaving, he phoned my parents, and they started forcing me through the school gates every morning. I had to take evasive action. So I resorted to my little hacking gag again, and within two weeks I'd managed to get kicked out . . .

. . . *And* pick up a police record.

I stopped running and stood staring across the river.

I had just reviewed my life to date, and it was a pitiful catalogue of failure. I had managed to make a complete mess of everything. I was a criminal. I had failed at school – twice. I had failed to make a single friend. I had even failed to be loved by my own mother: quite an achievement.

Nobody really wanted me around.

I was shivering. It was getting cold. I knew I had to keep moving so I started to walk, mindlessly on and on, until I found my legs had carried me to my old sanctuary: the library.

I opened the door and wandered across to the seat in the corner. I sat down in front of the terminal. Someone had left a newspaper on the table next to the monitor. It was open at the job ads.

That's when it hit me. Like a bolt of lightning. I could get a job! I was sixteen now. And if I got a job, I could probably afford to move out – get away from my parents . . . and darling Ted!

I began to feel just a tiny flutter of optimism. What if I could get a job in a science lab? One with an electron microscope?

That would be OK. That would be more than OK. That would be cool.

With shaking fingers I started surfing. I keyed in: *research jobs – electron microscope*. Loads of technician jobs came up. My heart thumped as I trawled. Although most of them were in the States, there were a few in the UK . . .

For someone quite clever I guess I could be pretty stupid.

In what universe was I expecting anyone to invite a sixteen-year-old felon with no qualifications into their precious science lab?

Ad after ad was filled with lists of annoying requirements . . . stuff like ‘three years experience, blah blah . . . doctorate . . . relevant expertise . . .’

I didn’t even have A levels. I’d be lucky if I could get a job making beds in a hotel. Angrily, I started deleting my search bar, and accidentally double-clicked on *electron microscope*. A new entry popped up.

St Magdalene’s acquire an electron microscope . . . cached.

Without a lot of interest, I clicked on the page and started reading. The name St Magdalene’s rang a little bell. It had come up before on one of my researches – ancient Roman burial sites or something . . .

I started reading.

St Magdalene’s School in central London has just acquired a scanning electron microscope at a cost of £1.8 million. St Magdalene’s is unique – the only school in the world where the pupils need an IQ score in excess of 170. This is off-the-scale genius level. They are also required

to sit a four-day sequence of tests and interviews. It is consequently a small school, with very few places. Only the brilliant need apply.

Should such a school exist? Many educationalists question the elitism of such an establishment, insisting that it is in the interest of children and the system generally that schools cover a full spectrum of abilities. But the head teacher, Dr Terence Crispin, is adamant that St Magdalene's children need this rarefied environment to thrive . . .

It was the next line that made my stomach twist.

. . . Super-gifted children can have difficulties in mainstream education, and here they are understood and given scope . . .

I clicked on to the St Magdalene's School website.

It looked a bit like a medieval castle, built round a cobbled courtyard. Couldn't be more different from the purpose-built four-storey block that was Downley Comprehensive. I clicked on *Facilities* . . . and within a couple of seconds I was staring at their newly acquired microscope.

My heart missed a beat. I HAD to go there.

How did you apply? Feverishly, I searched through the contact info and application forms. Then suddenly I saw a line that made me want to be sick.

Fees: £10,000 per term.

Yeah, right.

I slammed my fist down on to the table. Someone coughed and I remembered where I was.

I hadn't cried for years. So I didn't recognize the tightness in

my throat, until the tears started plopping down on to the keypad. I shut down and stormed out of the library.

It was late by the time I turned the key in the lock. I was hoping they'd all be in bed. Mum was waiting.

'Hi.' I tried to sound nonchalant.

Nonchalance was clearly not the right note.

'Eva – where *were* you? I've been going out of my mind. I was about to call the police . . .'

My heart sank. How had I managed to turn myself into a delinquent?

I sighed, slumped down on the sofa and put my head in my hands. I should have phoned. Should have taken my mobile. I looked at my mother. She was pale. Lined. Worried and angry.

She didn't have the faintest idea how to deal with me. I wanted to be angry with her, but instead I felt an unexpected wave of sympathy. She had been landed with a rubbish daughter who couldn't do the simplest thing right.

I had to get away. Give them all a break.

'Look – I'm sorry, Mum,' I whispered, and slowly climbed the stairs to my room.

I couldn't sleep, so I sat on my bed, and took out my laptop. I logged on and found myself Googling St Magdalene's again.

How was I going to find that kind of money? Rob a bank? I probably could. I could hack my way into most places – why not a bank? First I'd need to set up an account – then I'd have to transfer enough money into it to cover two years of fees – £60,000. Whoa!

My fingers started flying, rising to the challenge. And then abruptly I stopped.

What was I doing?

I may have had a criminal record but I wasn't actually a criminal, was I? I lay back against the pillows. No. I couldn't do it.

I clicked back to the St Magdalene site. Did another virtual tour of the science labs, the art history wing, the drama studios. I masochistically clicked back on the application page.

And then I saw it. A tiny little link labelled *Scholarships & Bursaries*. How had I missed this before?

A number of means-tested bursaries are available. They are awarded on the basis of academic ability and financial need. When a full bursary is offered, it will cover the cost of all tuition, equipment and boarding fees.

Boarding fees? A boarding school? A TOTAL escape . . .

I started filling out the application form then and there. It was pretty straightforward. I knew the difficult questions came later – if they invited you in.

At 3 a.m. I pressed the send button. At 4 a.m. I was lying in the dark trying not to hope too hard.

3

Control

Londinium

AD 152

Sethos Leontis's hopes were limited. Although some irrepressible part of him hoped to live to see another day, he knew he had little control over his destiny. A gladiator lived and died by the will of others.

Nevertheless Seth took what control he could: he had total possession of his body. It was honed. Ready. He had trained hard: harder than most of the others; harder than the lanista had pushed him, and Zeus knew the lanista's regime was savage.

He looked out across the practice arena. It was unusually peaceful. The rest of the gladiators were on the other side of the city now, feasting. They felt they justly deserved the banquet they were enjoying – one of the few pleasures of their dangerous lives. But for Seth, attending the banquet in some way indicated an acceptance of the world he'd been dragged into. He would never do that. He was not born to be a slave: fighting to survive; subject to the whim of the crowd; under the ruthless

ownership of the maverick lanista, Tertius. He absently rubbed the tattoo on his arm, the tattoo that denoted his status. The muscles in his jaw flexed. He could not afford to lose his focus; anger was not helpful.

He had been blessed with strength, power, stamina and speed. But the gladiator he would be fighting tomorrow would probably possess most of these skills. And Sethos knew that if you intended to win, to live to see another day, you needed more than good skills. You needed an unshakeable determination, and absolute concentration. His concentration during a fight was so acute that it manifested as a kind of uncanny intuition. In practice, this meant that he could analyse his adversary so accurately, so quickly, that he was able to calculate the next move, and thus pre-empt it. This not only gave him a clinching advantage, it also made him mesmerizing to watch.

Sethos gazed out at the stone seats of the training arena. Later, when the feasting was over the area would be swarming with citizens, all eager to meet tomorrow's winners and losers. He shook his head. He hated the ritual. Hated the status ambivalence. They weren't free men, yet they were fêted and adored.

The tiny squeak of a sandal behind him initiated his lightning reflexes and his dagger was out, his posture tense.

'Oh, it's you, Matt!' He sheathed his weapon and raised an arm in greeting. Matthias was his friend, a fellow Corinthian slave, captured on the same raid. Too slight to be a fighter, Matthias had made himself indispensable to the familia with his training in medicines. He carried clean towels, water and a flask of oil.

‘Not at the banquet then?’ Matthias clapped Sethos across the shoulders and gestured for him to sit.

‘Are you surprised?’

‘They are fools to gorge themselves so near a fight. They will slow their minds and bodies.’

As he spoke, Matthias steered his friend to a nearby bench, and began to rub oil into his shoulders. He knew every muscle in Seth’s body, and slowly, methodically, made sure each one had been sufficiently warmed and loosened before moving on to the next. While his fingers worked, he saw again the drawings and charts his father had shown him: the bones; the muscle groups; the arteries and veins. But here he stopped his mind from wandering. He did not want to think about his father. He forced his mind back. Seth’s skin was so much paler than it had been in Corinth – so much less sun here in Londinium. Though today, on this glorious August evening, you could almost imagine yourself back home: preparing for the honourable games, not this bestial gladiatorial circus. He had not known Sethos well at home, but since they had been thrown together, he now loved him like a brother.

Matthias had been up since dawn, preparing the fresh Sabine olive oil with juniper leaves. He would do the same tomorrow. It was his way of helping to keep his friend alive. He was rubbing down Seth’s calves when the singing crowd started to make their way through the big stone gateway. They had clearly been drinking plenty of good wine: the party was loud and wild.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ murmured Sethos, trying to stand, but Matthias hadn’t finished and was too superstitious to stop now. He pushed his friend back down.

‘Patience, Seth. Only a few moments more.’

They did not have a few moments.

‘There he is! Sethos Leontis!’ The crowd started to converge on them.

‘Here, Sethos! Drink to your victory tomorrow!’

A cup of wine was pushed to his lips. He turned his mouth away, but hands were grabbing him, touching his oiled skin.

‘Hey! Give him some air! Zeus! Do you want him to suffocate before he makes it to the fight!’ shouted Matthias, trying to push them all back.

Just then Tertius and the rest of the familia came through into the arena.

The crowd became distracted. Some moved off to greet other heroes, but Sethos knew from experience that most of the women would stay here. As a *retiarius*, he wore virtually no armour, only a leather shoulder strap. So although he was strong, compared with the heavily armoured, sometimes massive opponents he faced, he needed to rely on his speed and agility. The women found this kind of fighting attractive, he supposed. He did not acknowledge that his physical beauty was another factor.

Reluctantly, Sethos flexed his shoulders, preparing to rise and face his admirers – there was no way the massage could be finished under these circumstances. But as he stood, he noticed a girl, head covered, standing just behind two older women. She was watching him, through heavy-lashed, dark almond eyes. Her eyes danced. She found his obvious discomfort amusing. The corners of her mouth twitched . . . her mouth – he had never seen a more lovely mouth: full lips, slightly parted over small white teeth. A tiny breeze lifted her head cover, and a

strand of black hair escaped. As she pushed it back, the gold jewellery on her wrist caught the light.

Sethos found his legs moving towards her. She blushed but held his gaze. The two women she stood with gasped in pleasure, unaware that the object of his interest stood just behind them.

‘Sethos Leontis! What an honour to meet you! We are such supporters! I cannot believe that one as young as you now holds eight wreaths! How is that possible?’

‘The gods have been kind. So – you will be watching the fight tomorrow?’ He spoke to them, but his eyes flicked over to the girl. She nodded imperceptibly.

‘We will certainly be there!’

‘May I know who my loyal supporters are?’

‘Oh, of course! I am Rufina Agrippa, and this is Flavia Natalis . . .’

Sethos took each lady’s hand in turn, and put it to his lips.

‘And?’ he prompted, shifting his gaze towards the almond eyes.

‘Oh! The *child*! Adopted daughter of Flavia and Domitus Natalis – Livia . . .’

Livia’s eyes shot fire. ‘I am almost seventeen, Rufina! Hardly a child!’

This time it was Sethos’s mouth that twitched. ‘Livia Natalis – a pleasure!’ he murmured, taking her hand and kissing it. Her skin smelled sweet, of rosewater and jasmine. He inhaled deeply, inconspicuously, but Rufina noted his interest and bristled.

‘Livia, will your betrothed be accompanying you to the games tomorrow?’

Livia's cheeks burned. 'Cassius is *not* my betrothed. I have not yet accepted him!'

And then she bit her lip. She had said too much.

'Come, Livia, there are many others waiting to speak with Sethos Leontis. Perhaps, Sethos, in the event of your victory, we will meet again at tomorrow's banquet?'

Flavia Natalis extended her hand, which he dutifully put to his lips. 'It would be an honour.'

As they moved away, Sethos gazed after them, willing the girl to turn round. He had almost given up hope, when she suddenly turned and shot him a secret glance. He touched his forehead in a mock salute, and she smiled. He felt a wave of unfamiliar warmth.

As they disappeared through the archway into the crowd, Sethos marvelled at the liberty of Roman women. In Corinth, where he came from, a girl would never be allowed the freedom of the city, and as for such an open defiance of her family's marriage arrangements . . . He shuddered to think of the repercussions, and felt a flood of protective fear for this lovely girl.

'Seth – what *are* you thinking?' Matthias hissed in his ear.

Sethos started, suddenly remembering where he was.

'She's an unmarried Roman citizen!'

Matthias was so damned sharp. Seth's jaw clenched. He knew what Matthias was saying. *Remember who you are: a slave.* He had no rights in this city. The girl, Livia, was as out of his reach as the sun in the sky.

'Stick to married women!' Matthias murmured, as another wave of flushed female admirers pushed their way forward to greet him.

Sethos remained in the arena for another half-hour, answering questions, allowing the Roman women to flirt with him. The lanista was watching him. Sethos knew it was his duty to be charming; the more popular he was the bigger the audience. But later, when he spotted the lanista sitting back on one of the stone seats with a jug of wine, and a woman on his knee, he seized his opportunity to slip out.

Matthias wasn't far behind. He loved the women who clustered around Sethos, and his proximity to the star gave him many social advantages, but the night before a fight his loyalty to his friend had to come first. They headed to their barracks. Sethos poured two cups of water from a jug, handed one to Matthias and took the other with him as he stretched out on his narrow mat. Matthias squatted at one end of the bed, poured a little oil into his palms, and proceeded with the interrupted massage.

Sethos began to relax. The massage felt good. He allowed his mind to wander – to the girl with the almond eyes. He had encountered so many women since being torn from his home. Some beautiful, some exotic, some powerful – all of them married. They had chosen him, and had made discreet arrangements to meet with him. But he had never wanted to *know* any of them, or actively seek them out.

His interest in Livia therefore came as a shock – an alien emotion. And Matt was right – it certainly wasn't healthy. Distinctly unhealthy, in fact. To even entertain the idea of a relationship with this girl was suicide. Roman law would show him no mercy. But what difference did one more unhealthy addition make to his life? He was a gladiator, after all.

He opened his eyes. Yes. He was a gladiator, and he had a

big fight in a matter of hours. He couldn't afford to be distracted. He had to concentrate his mind. Matthias had begun pummeling the other leg. Sethos shut his eyes again, and reminded himself of the running order. Although the fight lists weren't yet published, he knew he would be facing Protix Canitis, a massive Gaul who hated Romans and Greeks alike. Protix was a savage fighter, and his passionate hatred would be an even match for Seth's speed and intuition. Seth fervently hoped that Protix had availed himself of plenty of wine today. He could use all the help he could get. Suddenly his desire to win tomorrow felt acute, overpowering his usual simple motive of self-preservation. He sat up, eyes wide.

'What is it?' asked Matthias.

'I have to win.'

'You will win. You always win.'

'I mean, I need to win –'

'That's good –'

'Because afterwards, I am going to see the girl: Livia.'

Matthias shook his head. 'The *one* woman in Londinium he can't have, he chooses . . . Seth – do you *want* to die? Or have you had so many blows to the head that your brain's stopped functioning? Leave her alone. No woman is worth a death sentence.'

'Apollo's flames, Matt! My life is a death sentence! Surely to die for a woman would be a more purposeful cause?'

Matthias whistled through his teeth in frustration. He hated it when his friend was reckless. He became unmanageable. And it wasn't easy keeping Seth alive at the best of times. He was too passionate, too angry, too charming. All these qualities made him vulnerable.

But Matthias also recognized that Seth was far too clever to be managed. He read people so accurately that he could almost hear their thoughts. It was safer to keep his counsel for now.

‘Win your fight first – then decide what’s worth dying for.’

Seth smiled, and slapped Matthias across the shoulders. ‘That sounds like a plan.’

4

St Magdalene's

London

AD 2012

‘So, Eva – your parents? They are not with you today. Are they enthusiastic about your application here?’

‘Well – er –’

This interview was not going well. The pile of tests had gone fine – all pretty easy, but now I was sitting opposite the St Magdalene’s headmaster, Dr Crispin, and I’d more or less given up.

I’d started messing up when he asked me what subjects I would be interested in studying. This shouldn’t have been difficult. Not unless you happened to be some sort of weird misfit. Instead of just answering the question, I’d started to sweat: this was a topic I found it hard to be cool about. He’d just sat there waiting. Waiting for me to dig my own grave – which I obligingly did.

‘I think it’s crazy the way we’re made to choose between arts or sciences or humanities – why should people only be allowed to be curious about one minute corner of the universe? There

is so much to find out . . . If I had any control, I would be studying everything, anything . . .’ I’d tailed off, coughed, and started again, hoping he would forget my little outburst.

‘Sorry – I guess – well, the A levels I’ve been doing are maths, applied maths, biology, physics, chemistry . . .’

He’d stared at me for a moment, pursed his lips, and then written a load of notes on a pad. Not a good sign. Then – to finally seal my fate – he moved on to the personal stuff: my parents. And there was no way I was prepared to go there. I just couldn’t help myself – I resorted to my fallback position: gazing out of the window. I knew it irritated the hell out of teachers. They called it *disengaged*. I called it *survival*.

He waited. I gazed. He finally cracked.

‘I see. All right then, let me ask you something else. Perhaps you’d be good enough to tell me why you gave up on your previous secondary schools – er – North York High School and – er – Downley Comprehensive?’

How did he know *I’d* given up on *them*? Expulsion normally suggests it’s the other way round. Was he giving me a chance to explain?

I tried to drag myself back to the room. Headmaster. St Magdalene’s. A place I *really* wanted to be.

He was still talking. ‘. . . To lose one school could be regarded as a misfortune, but to lose two may begin to look like carelessness?’

I cleared my throat. ‘Careless – but consistent,’ I countered.

His sharp blue eyes were squinting at me through half-moon glasses. Suddenly his bony face broke into a smile. ‘Yes, that is true . . . And here at St Magdalene’s we have often found consistency to be an admirable virtue . . .’

‘We are also a little intrigued by your prodigious – how should I put this? – extracurricular abilities . . .’

I stared back at him, bewildered.

‘With – ahem – computers . . .’

‘Ah,’ I said. Damn. I’d been hoping to keep the hacking quiet.

‘I’d be interested to find out how long it takes you to get into my account, Ms Koretzky. Naturally, we have fashioned a considerable number of obstacles – it would be fascinating to learn how successfully . . .’

And this, it turned out, was his way of telling me I’d won a place at his school.

Two weeks later, I returned to St Magdalene’s with a big suitcase, my acoustic guitar and a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

My mum and Colin had responded to the news with mixed feelings. Mostly they were relieved that someone was taking me off their hands. But being only too familiar with my record of past successes, they didn’t think they’d have peace and quiet for very long. I couldn’t blame them. I felt pretty much the same way.

Virtually everyone at St Mag’s had been there since they were eleven, and most of them boarded as they came from all over the country. I’d read *Malory Towers* and *Harry Potter* so my expectation of boarding school was gilded in fantasy, but I didn’t arrive filled with bubbling hope of friendship and adventure. I was way too realistic.

Which meant I was completely thrown by Ruby. Ruby was the girl chosen to show me around. She was also sixteen, tall, blonde, willowy, cool. Not like me at all – olive-skinned, dark-haired and weird. She smiled easily, laughed easily, talked easily.

‘Right then, Eva, this is our boarding house.’

I looked up at the name carved in the stone above the front door.

‘Isaac Newton,’ I read.

‘All the houses are named after influential thinkers connected with St Mag’s.’

‘What’s Isaac Newton’s connection?’

‘They say he came and lectured here,’ shrugged Ruby.

‘But – but wasn’t he around in the seventeenth century?’

‘We’ve got earlier ones than him! I mean Omar, a boy in our year, is in Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer goes back *ages*! St Magdalene’s has been around – God, I don’t know – forever!’

As she talked, Ruby was leading me through the front door, along a narrow corridor and up a winding staircase. She was moving too fast for me to get a good look at the hundreds of pictures that lined the walls. Towards the end of the corridor, she suddenly stopped and flung open a door.

‘This is your room.’

I stepped in cautiously. ‘What? Don’t we sleep in *dorms*?’

‘Ha ha! You’ve been reading Enid Blyton, haven’t you? I made that mistake! No – we get our own rooms, desks, PCs, showers . . . it’s great.’

And she was right. It was great. Nothing fancy – no Hogwarts four-posters or anything. Although we’d just walked through a corridor that looked like it was centuries old, the bedrooms were surprisingly modern. All glass and light wood. We even had our own en-suite shower rooms! Ruby quickly showed me where to stow my things, how to double-lock my door so *nobody* could get in, and how to get out of the building after curfew. Essential stuff. Then she took me to her room.

‘Wow!’ I gasped. She’d transformed the place. The bed was covered in an intricately patterned Mexican blanket and loads of cushions. Not one scrap of the wall was visible through the mass of postcards, photos and posters. She had also added a couple of tall chrome lamps and a serious music system.

‘Come and sit down,’ she said, flopping on to her bed. I hesitantly sat down next her.

‘OK, Eva! Tell me what brings you to St Mag’s! I want to know *everything*!’

‘Er,’ I stalled. This was unexpected.

Ruby sat there waiting.

‘Well – er –’ I swallowed. It felt like I was back in the headmaster’s office. ‘I f-found out about the school online and filled in an application form . . .’ I shrugged, hoping that would be enough.

It wasn’t. She just stared at me, waiting for the rest.

‘What?’ I asked, longing to get back to my own room.

‘Oh, come on, Eva!’

I bit my lip nervously. ‘What do you want to know?’ I croaked.

‘What school were you at before?’

‘Downley Comprehensive.’

‘And . . . ?’ she said, rolling her eyes.

‘And what?’

‘And – why did you leave?’

‘I got myself expelled . . .’

‘Expelled?’

Her shocked expression shut me up. Imagine her face if she found out I’d managed to get expelled twice.

She shook her head, leaned back against the pillows and waited for me to say something.

I didn't.

'Eva! How did you get expelled?'

I rolled my eyes. 'Long story . . .'

'I've got time.'

I just shook my head.

Ruby sighed, jumped off the bed and then began rifling around underneath it. A couple of seconds later she dragged out a tin, which she pulled up on to the bed and opened.

'My sister made these. I only offer them to totally monosyllabic new girls . . . Go on – help yourself!' she grinned.

Inside the tin was a pile of misshapen chocolate cookies. I took one.

'Thanks,' I mumbled.

'So – if you aren't going to spill about your evil past, at least tell me about your family. I've told you something about mine . . . I've got a sister. Actually, I've got two. Now – your turn . . . Your parents . . . Why didn't they bring you?'

I sat in silence for a couple of seconds. Officially chewing. Unofficially wondering how the hell I was going to get out of this room.

'*Eva!*' Ruby said in exasperation. 'I'm going to keep you here until you say something . . . so unless you want to live in silence on my sister's cookies for the rest of your life (and I can assure you they aren't *that* good), you might as well start talking.'

God, was she undercover Gestapo?

'So – what do you want to know?' I said warily.

'Your *parents?*'

'Well . . . I don't exactly have *parents* –' I muttered, making a move for the door.

She put an arm out to stop me. 'Hey! Don't go! I really didn't

mean to freak you out! I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you'd lost your parents – I'm such a tactless idiot.'

She looked so guilty I couldn't help relenting.

'No, Ruby – I didn't mean you to think – er – well – I do have parents – sort of . . .'

She just sat there, waiting for more. I sighed and sat back down.

'I have a mother. My dad died when I was small –'

'Oh, you poor thing! That's awful. Do you remember him?'

I stared at her, realizing that she was the first person who had ever asked me about him. I had spent years trying not to think about my dad. Mum had been so stricken when he died that I was never allowed to mention his name, so he had been my guilty secret. I had one beaten-up old photo of him, which I kept under the lining paper in my sock drawer. In desperate moments I'd pull out his picture and confide in him, and in truth when I was younger this had comforted me. But I eventually got too old to believe in the restorative power of an old photo. And the more dysfunctional my life became, the less able I felt to face him. I knew he'd be too disappointed in me. I hadn't looked at that photo in years.

I shook my head sadly.

Ruby was staring at me. 'You don't remember him at all?'

I sighed. 'Yes, I remember him . . . Moments . . . Riding high on his shoulders, his hands tight round my ankles . . . sitting in my car seat gazing at the back of his head . . .'

'How did he die?'

'Car crash.'

'So it's just you and your mum?'

'No.'

‘Sorry – if you really don’t want to talk about it . . .’

I took a deep breath.

‘My mother remarried when I was seven.’

‘I’m guessing he’s not your favourite guy?’

I tried to picture Colin. Had I ever liked him?

‘I think when he first turned up I wanted to like him . . . My dad had been dead a while – I didn’t have replacement issues or anything . . . but he had a son of his own . . .’

‘You’ve got a brother?’

‘STEPbrother,’ I corrected.

Why was I spilling like this?

‘Oh my God, Eva! This is better than *Neighbours*. What’s he like?’

I pressed my lips together. I’d said way too much. My palms were beginning to sweat.

‘Aw, come *on*, Eva!’ she pressed.

I sat in silence.

‘OK, you’ve asked for it . . .’ She grinned purposefully.

My heart started to thud. Oh God – was she turning on me already?

‘Asked for what?’ I croaked, my eyes darting wildly for the door.

‘Since you are providing me with such an abysmally disappointing amount of information, you will now be subjected to . . .’ She looked across at me and wiggled her eyebrows . . . ‘a twenty-minute monologue – at least – about me and my family.’

I blinked.

‘Ready to change your mind?’

I shook my head and grinned.

Ruby leaned back and crossed her legs.

‘OK – just remember – you’ve only got yourself to blame . . .
Hmmm. Where to begin? OK. So – like I said I have two sisters,
two parents, a dog, three cats and a horse. We live in Suffolk
. . . well – our main family home is in Suffolk, though my father
has a flat he uses in London . . .’

I raised my eyebrows.

She grinned. ‘He’s a high court judge, so when they’re in
session he stays in London. He sometimes takes me out to
dinner . . .’

‘Is that allowed?’

‘Yeah – they’re pretty cool here about boarders. They need
some sort of email confirmation from the parent, and then you
just sign out. Maybe one evening you could come with me?’

I swallowed. A big lump had just formed in my throat. Ruby
and me. Like normal friends . . .

‘It also means that when he’s not in London, we’ve got some-
where empty to go after curfew!’ she grinned wickedly.

‘Wow!’ I breathed. This was beginning to feel quite *St Trinians*.

‘What about your mum? Does she ever come with him?’

‘Not really. She’s not crazy about London. She says she can’t
think properly here. She spends most of the time in her studio
at home – she’s a conceptual artist. You may have heard of her
– Martha Gaine?’

Had I heard of her! I’d have had to be living on a different
planet not to have heard of her.

‘Yeah, I’ve heard of her. I love that *Rain* installation she
did . . .’

Ruby looked at me, surprised. ‘To be honest, Eva, I don’t
really get her art! It all seems a bit random to me. Miranda
loves it, though.’

‘Miranda?’

‘My big sister. She’s at university in the States, majoring in art history.’

‘Did Miranda come here too?’

‘No. She didn’t pass the entrance exams. My father couldn’t believe it. He came here when he was young, but he assured Miranda it wasn’t nearly such a geeky school in his day.’

‘Lucky for him you got in then!’ I laughed.

She cocked her head to one side. ‘It may not have been luck, Eva,’ she whispered. ‘I’m not sure I would have got in if he hadn’t paid for the new philosophy wing.’

I sat in silence digesting this piece of information. She was watching me through narrowed eyes. I tried not to look shocked, but clearly failed.

‘What disturbs you more, Eva? That he can afford to buy me a place, or that the school let him?’

I shrugged. ‘Both. Neither. I think I’m trying to imagine a dad who cares that much! So are you glad you’re here?’

‘Yeah. It’s OK. I just about keep up.’

A bell rang.

‘Good, dinner time! Come on – I’ll show you where we eat . . .’

5

Others

London

AD 2012

We crossed the quad to the dining room. It was wood-panelled, with big old portraits hanging on the walls, and chandeliers from the ceiling. Kids with trays were gradually filling the long tables and benches. We started queuing. The food didn't smell too bad. Way better than Downley Comp, but I knew I wouldn't be able to eat. I was too hyped. I took a glass of juice and a banana.

'Is that all you're having? God – you're not anorexic, are you?' asked Ruby, frowning.

'Anorexic? No – I just feel a bit –'

'Oh, yeah! Sorry – forgot – you've just arrived . . . That can make you feel sick. You'll be starving later, though. Here, take a couple of these – they've saved my life more than once . . .'

She shoved two flapjacks on to my tray.

'Thanks,' I mumbled.

We carried our trays over to a half-full bench. The kids sitting there watched us as we unloaded our food.

‘Hey, Rubes . . .’ A tall boy, with longish dark hair grinned up at us.

‘Omar – this is Eva . . .’

She lightly ran her hand along the back of his shirt. He smiled at her, and then flicked a smile at me. While Ruby attacked her plate of food, Omar introduced me to the rest of the table. Everyone seemed so friendly I began to relax.

After supper, Ruby showed me the school library. It was unbelievable. The subject sections were in separate rooms, each with its own identity. We started with the biology area. It had a whole central aisle of life-sized skeletons . . . a human male, human female, human child, mouse, dog, elephant, iguana, macaw . . . there were at least thirty of them. The spaces of wall not covered in book shelving were filled with muscle charts, nerve charts, pressed flower and plant specimens, trays of butterflies . . . I just wanted to stand and stare, but Ruby was pulling me up a winding staircase into a circular room.

‘Physics,’ she announced.

‘Wow!’ I breathed, as I gazed up at a domed ceiling twinkling with the stars and planets of our solar system.

‘Cool, eh? And look at this . . . it’s a space tracker – it charts the rapidly changing positions and distances between earth and all the other named planets . . . watch.’ Ruby typed *Mercury* on to a keypad at the base of the instrument, and an arrow swivelled and pointed towards my feet.

‘Hmmm,’ I said. ‘That’s cool.’

‘What are you thinking?’ she asked.

‘I’m thinking – that must be the trajectory of Mercury at the moment?’

‘Oh God, Eva, you’re the real thing, aren’t you? When I first came up here and saw that the arrow pointed at a planet underneath me, I thought the machine was broken.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I assumed space was up there, in the sky . . . not all around us. When did you realize?’

I shrugged, but I was watching the screen racing through its calculation. For a few seconds it settled on 222,040,561 km. So that’s how far away Mercury was. But then the arrow shifted a little and the numbers changed to 222,040,967 km. This was mind-blowing. Until then I hadn’t really understood that the planets were all moving around so fast. Mercury had just moved 300 km in less than two seconds.

‘Ruby, this is incredible!’ I wanted to check out another planet, but she was hauling me off again, up a narrow staircase round and round at least a hundred steps, until we finally reached a small arched door.

We ducked our heads. I gasped. We were in an observatory. The ceiling and walls were made entirely of glass. In the centre of the room was a massive telescope, pointing up through the ceiling. And ranged around it, facing out towards the night sky, were another twelve smaller telescopes.

‘I don’t do astrophysics, Eva, so I can’t remember what the different telescopes do. I think they all have different kinds of lenses or something. Oh – and Harry told me that we can also get data access to the really giant telescopes at NASA . . .’

In a daze, I walked across to the big telescope in the centre of the room, cautiously putting a hand out to touch it. But Ruby was looking at her watch.

‘Eva, I have to show you the rest of the library and get you

to the common room in ten minutes . . . I promise you – these will still be here tomorrow!’

I sighed, and let her drag me away. For the next ten minutes I was whisked through the art library – were those actual Titians on the wall? Through philosophy and ethics (it had a tented ceiling) . . . maths (the floor was also a chessboard) . . . chemistry (the walls were covered in formulae), English and drama (beanbags and sofas), languages (headphones and terminals), history (the books were all ranged round an enormous printing press), geography (globes like balloons hanging from the ceiling), Latin and Greek (incredible replica statues of gods dotted around the room), economics (a running screen along the wall charting real-time currency changes), and finally around the music section, which had cases filled with historic musical instruments, a couple going right back to the first century AD.

‘If you get permission, you’re allowed to have a go on them,’ said Ruby, trying to hurry me through. ‘Don’t you think that kithara looks a bit like a guitar?’

‘Ha – I don’t s’pose they did many rock gigs in ancient Rome.’

‘Is that what you’re into? I saw you brought a guitar . . .’

I shrugged. ‘Rock? Yeah, I guess so – I like lots of stuff . . .’

‘Maybe you should hook up with Astrid – she’ll probably be in the common room . . . She’s cool – if she likes you!’

We had swung out of the library double doors and were heading across the quad.

‘So – the common room . . . ?’

‘It’s just a place the seniors hang out after 9 p.m. Until then

you're expected to be working or rehearsing or whatever . . . OK, this is it . . .'

Ruby opened a door on to a room where about twenty students were sprawled across sofas and chairs. Ruby strolled towards the coffee machine. She found a couple of mugs and started pouring coffee from the steaming jug.

'Eva – do you want milk, sugar?' she asked.

The room had gone kind of silent. I swallowed.

'Milk, thanks.' My voice came out in a kind of squeaky whisper. Why did she have to bring me here? I was so much happier in the library.

I stood around for an eternity while she added milk and stirred, and then found myself herded towards a big armchair.

'Sit,' she commanded and I sat. Ruby perched on the arm.

I leaned back and gratefully held on to the coffee cup she handed me. At least it gave me something to do with my hands, and more importantly something to focus on apart from the twenty pairs of eyes all staring in my direction.

I was so busy looking down that I didn't notice Omar heading towards our chair until he'd perched himself on the other arm.

'Hey, you two,' he smiled. 'How's the tour going?'

Ruby started filling him in, and I began to relax. Conversations around the room had started up again, and pretty soon I considered it safe to look up over the rim of my mug and check the place out.

It was a nice room – mood lighting, deep red walls. Even a fireplace. One wall was covered by a big heavy curtain, which made it feel cosier.

Ruby, who had been asking Omar about his football practice, suddenly nudged me and said, ‘Do you want to see what’s on the other side of that curtain?’

She was already walking over to it. I watched as she pulled it open.

‘See?’ she laughed. ‘The room is actually way bigger! We just use this end most of the time, but for events – gigs, parties and stuff – we open up the whole space. Look – there’s even a small stage at the far end. Next week we’re planning a stand-up night. A couple of guys here,’ and she raised an eyebrow at Omar, ‘fancy themselves as comedians . . . Hey! Do you want me to put your name down for a slot?’

‘You’ve gotta be joking,’ I gasped, truly terrified.

She squawked with laughter. ‘Yeah, Eva. I am . . . Sorry!’

As jokes go, that had *not* been funny. I tried to get my heart to slow down.

Omar gave me a nudge. ‘Hey, Eva . . . it’s OK. Relax!’

Relax! Huh. But I did my best.

And by the time I returned to my room that night I honestly felt like I had finally joined the human race. I had met about a thousand new people, and though I spent most of the time listening to their conversations, not actually talking myself, I had still felt – well – comfortable. I didn’t need to pretend, I didn’t have to hide. For the first time ever I didn’t feel like some sort of impostor. It was like I had finally arrived home.

I unpacked my case, and caught myself looking forward to the next day – another first. I felt this weird need to laugh out loud. Luckily, I just about managed to stop myself. I put on my pyjamas, brushed my teeth, turned out the light, got under

the duvet and shut my eyes. Then I opened them again. I put the light on, found my phone and texted my mother.

Hi Mum. All good. Love Eva.

I plugged in the phone charger, turned out the light and fell asleep.

6

Gladiator

Londinium

AD 152

The amphitheatre was heaving with people. Armour was polished, weapons oiled and sharpened. The gladiators were ready. They began processing on to the fresh new sand towards the governor Cnaeus Papirius Aelianus.

‘Hail Aelianus! Those who are about to die salute you.’

The crowd was cheering and shouting. Sethos bowed but avoided looking directly into the crowd. He didn’t want to see individuals. He preferred them as a braying faceless mass. As he processed with the other gladiators round the arena, he flexed his fingers. In his left hand he carried the net, and in his right the trident. His sharpened dagger was slung through his belt. Though it was evening, the August sun was still so hot his fingers were finding it hard to keep purchase on their weapons. He would need to sand them again.

When the gladiators had finished their slow procession, they gathered behind the big wooden gates, while the musicians played. Sethos knew that in a few moments he would be fight-

ing for his life. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his body, stilling it, preparing himself. Others resharpened swords, or spat on armour, or roared. He stood apart, silent, contained. Nobody touched him. He created an invisible barrier around himself, which inexplicably all the other gladiators respected. The horns sounded and Sethos knew it was time.

He opened his eyes. Matthias was now standing beside him. They slapped each other's right hand, just as the gate opened. Tertius, his owner, yelled at the gladiators to get the hell out there, so moments later Seth was running across the arena with the rest of the combatants.

Protix Canitis, his massive, heavily armoured opponent, lumbered towards him, shaking his sword at the crowd. People cheered with delight. Sethos knew it was his turn to greet the audience. Raising his chin, he did his wry mock salute and grinned. The crowd went wild.

'SETHOS LEONTIS! SETHOS LEONTIS! SETHOS LEONTIS!' they chanted.

But he wasn't listening. He had gone to the place in his head where he could function most effectively. He began dancing round his opponent. The Gaul swivelled clumsily, but Sethos knew that this man was not clumsy. He was feigning. Protix played an early show of ungainliness to make himself look more dexterous later when he jabbed accurately. And Protix was lethally accurate. He lulled his opponents into a false sense of complacency until they were taking stupid risks to go in for the kill. Sethos knew better. He had watched Protix fight. He understood the technique – admired it. So he danced and watched. He knew Protix wanted to wait for him to tire, but Seth was very fit. Protix was going to have a long wait. And Sethos was a very patient man.

At last Protix saw that he'd have to be a little more proactive. The crowd was getting restless. But he knew that the moment he lunged he became vulnerable to the net. Once he was netted he was helpless, so he had to avoid that.

His game plan was to disarm Sethos first, and then go in for the kill. Sethos understood this, so he kept a tight hold of his trident, and swirled the net, so there was no way the Gaul could catch it. Protix was much slower in his armour than Sethos, so speed was something he could not compete with.

Sethos darted around his opponent, biding his time. He was waiting for his opportunity. Protix had two vulnerable spots: his neck – the gap between his helmet and breastplate – and under the arm. An injury in either of these places would finish the fight. Unlike Protix, Sethos didn't have a game plan. He was infinitely flexible when it came to fighting. But he did have one objective. And that was to win: to get his opponent down, and the dagger to his throat. He would try to do this with as little injury to either of them as possible. It was never his intention to kill, or to inflict fatal wounds. The lanistas preferred their fighters alive. But nobody had any real control over the crowd, and they were the ones who decided the final outcome.

Both Seth and Protix were aware that they needed to start fighting in earnest or the crowd would grow savage. Protix was still waiting for Sethos to tire, so Sethos realized it was his job to provide the entertainment. He started jabbing at the giant with his trident. Protix roared and thrashed out with his sword. But his moves were predictable, and Sethos appeared to anticipate each thrust even before Protix himself had decided where to aim. Seth's ability to predict moves had the crowd entranced. They clapped appreciatively. Frustrated and hot, Protix paused

in his thrashing. The crowd jeered. This riled him, and he began aiming wildly; the more he thrashed, the more Sethos danced and ducked.

‘*SETHOS! SETHOS!*’ the crowd cheered, which fuelled Protix’s anger. He was becoming uncontrolled and indiscriminate, blundering around the arena like a drunk. The crowd booed ruthlessly, which enraged him further. Suddenly he turned and roared furiously at the auditorium, at which point Sethos threw his trident. It hit Protix in the neck, not too deep but agonizing. Protix bellowed, grabbed the trident, and holding it between both hands, prepared to snap it in half. The crowd whooped.

Sethos had been counting on this move, so just as Protix flexed to snap the trident, he shot his net out. Protix flailed frantically, caught in the net.

‘Got you!’ breathed Sethos. But as he moved in to use his dagger, a flash of gold in the crowd momentarily distracted him. Glancing towards it, he found himself staring straight into a pair of almond eyes.

The eyes widened in horror, because in that one moment of distraction Protix had swung his sword free and was suddenly slicing hard through leather into Seth’s shoulder. White pain seared through him as blood gushed from the wound, the impact of the blow propelling Sethos backwards. But his reflexes were acute, and he recovered his balance just in time to stop himself falling. Before Protix had a chance to register that his opponent had not been immobilized, Sethos had twisted the net around Protix’s sword, incapacitating it. At the same time Seth’s right hand had unsheathed the dagger at his belt. Instantly it was touching Protix’s throat – and the fight was won.

Sethos stood victorious, his left arm hanging limply, dripping blood, his right hand at Protix's throat, waiting for the verdict. He turned his eyes towards the governor. The crowd was wildly yelling, 'DIE! DIE! DIE!'

Cnaeus Papirius Aelianus was not a sentimental man, and he understood his citizens. He swiftly glanced around at them and nodded, then slowly turned his thumb. Protix was to receive no mercy.

At that moment Sethos hated them all. He hated their insatiable desire for blood. It made him sick. He dropped his gaze to the man at his feet, and looked through the helmet into the eyes of the Gaul.

'May your journey be swift,' he whispered, and with one quick, precise movement plunged a fatal blow deep into Protix's neck. The Gaul slumped forward against Seth's legs. As he did so, the jarring caused Seth's shoulder to flame with pain. He slowly bent to wipe his dagger in the sand, sheathed it, and started back towards the wooden gate. But a few steps in, his eyes began to swim, his legs gave way and he staggered. The lanista and Matthias ran into the arena to help him, but they couldn't reach him in time. The last thing Sethos saw that day was the sand rising up to meet him.