

# QUADRATUM

The closer his turn drew to battle in the squared arena, the faster he canvased the granite floor of a windowless room measuring fifteen strides by nineteen, the greater his chest already full demanded more air. Yet he felt suffocated and stopped pacing to huff with bated breath.

Sweat trickling his back escaped the hem of his padded tunic and leaked past the waistband of his skirt, made his legs itch and tickled his ankles. His attention drifted from the slickened tops of his feet to the bloodstain he occupied and he wondered if the rust-colored, oblong spot commemorated a death from the final match of the games that got outlawed over two decades ago. A possibility which troubled not due to the barbarity but because lack of achievements marked his presence undeserving.

Countless herein this room the number of operations a chirurgium performed on heroes grasping at survival-threads. A warped table in the center was where the courageous had lain, begging the gods to end their pain between shrieks, many of which owed themselves to the bow-and-twine drill collecting dust on a stand in the corner.

Sharp, he found, running his thumb over teeth of the thimble-shaped drill-bit. He had seen such a device worked on the head of his father's stable-slave. To rotate the drill you pulled the bow side-to-side. Twine wrapped around the top of the shaft spun the bit that bore into a patient's skull and removed pieces with foreign fragments or relieved pressure on the brain. Beside the medical instrument stood a dozen steel plates used for covering holes. Tiny nails for affixing the covers to bone lay in a tin box.

Gruesome, yes; excruciating, sure. But combatants from previous generations were fortunate to receive care whereas men and women of his era healed on their own or perished. By winning and recovering, they earned position in fighting-schools and became harenarae worthy of medical attention—warriors to face-off in great amphitheaters getting constructed across the nation of Calasade now that its leaders had relegalized the games. Participants in those oval stadiums called the Bleeding Grounds could gain fame and untold riches.

Maybe one of the two men now fighting in this quadratum.

Through the wall, over grunts and cries, he heard swords clanging. Louder than metal-on-metal clamored spectators. Their burgeoning shouts and stomping rendered his skin gooseflesh. He cursed the lack of windows; damned the gods as well for how each second of anticipation lasted minutes. There came the sharp cracking of wood. The crowd oohing and awing silenced when the kind of screech that twisted a person's guts pierced his ears just before a referee's holler signaled death.

Quiet now except for the dragging of a body across sand and footsteps echoing throughout the corridor.

The door of the operating room swung inward, squeaking. In limped a wiry, old man intimate with scorching afternoons; a shriveled raisin resembling nothing of the artful killer and skilled tutor he was.

"Thalazar," declared the ludimagister, "your turn is after the next match."

He nodded, exhaled through his nose the butterflies taking flight in his stomach. "My opponent?"

"Taller than your seventy inches by a foot. Beefy, stronger than you despite your muscle. Bate and retreat. Force him to waste energy chasing you."

"I am to dance?"

"To ensure the beast cannot grapple. That happens, you are done."

"My weapons?"

"Curved short-swords. No shield."

Thalazar formed and reformed fists. "When am I to get the blades?"

"A guard will hand over a pair of cinacae prior to your match getting called. Same protocol applies to criminals and slaves."

"Strange how they initially revolted me. Now? I count them benevolentiae."

"Life is ironic. The older you are the truer that holds."

His father had claimed the same along with, 'Do not expect years alone to make you wise. Wisdom comes through *choosing* to learn by experience.' Sage instruction he once thought blatherskite. "What is my opponent to wield?"

“A flail. Chain long as your shin. Ball spiked.”

“Armored?”

“Aio. Iron leggings and breastplate. Helmeted. His shield spans an arm-length and a third your height.”

“A scutum is heavy.” Thalazar let a half-smile creep into his expression. “Faster to bring exhaustion.”

“Careful. Hubris leads fools to premature graves.”

“No less than trepidation.”

The ludimagister stuck out a hand. “An honor, training you. Few students are so adept or earnest.” The grip belied his boniness. Always three pumps. Same number of taps on a practice-sword heralded every lesson. “Make the fight memorable. Your debut could count as the finale.”

Coldness in his gut seeped into his testicles. “Meaning?”

“Someone from northern country sits among the crowd. Asks after a man named Thalarus, son to a nobilis, of cropped sable hair and a goatee.”

“Said questioner—black toga, silver sash, emblem of a lion standing upright?”

“Aio. Thin as a spike. Squints.”

“My brother. The name he gave is my true praenomen. I suppose the hope is desperate that a long mane, full beard, and months of training have made me unrecognizable.”

“Perish the thought.” The ludimagister winced. “Your frater wishes to return you home. Offered forty gold to whomever reveals your whereabouts.”

“How much to purchase your freedom and your wife’s?”

“Couple thousand, give or take.”

Thalarus turned to the shelving at the back. Gone were medical papyri rolls that should have rested within rhombus containers. He reflected on the ludus, how his cell first seeming tiny grew on him, and the orphan-slave charged with carrying buckets of water from which trainees drank. Poor boy. Grubby, forever hungry, gashes on either side of his protruding spine. Regardless those hardships, the lad lightened his mood ad

infinitum during late-night visits when Thalarus read to him. “Can five thousand chrysaes free and leave you enough to provide for the puer aquam?”

“Doubtful. Our lanista is fond of him.”

“Fond?” Thalarus faced the ludimagister. “He whips the puer aquam.”

“Aio, but the lashes are not punishment. Unwavering purpose, that of servae. We please. In any fashion masters see fit.”

“I see.” Common, a man of power favoring a prepubescent lad, so why, Thalarus wondered, did he grind his teeth? “Inform my frater I agree to go home on the condition he pays you ten thousand gold. Get the boy, your wife. Enjoy libertas.”

The ludimagister blinked, then gawked. “Why blackmail familia to help those enslaved?”

“For you, a well-deserved reward. You taught me more than swordplay. As for the puer aquam, I would see him freed as the price for my familia enchaining me.”

“Chained? You?”

“Slavery comes in several forms.”

The ludimagister rubbed his chin. “I ponder what is so terrible being the offspring to a praefectus that incited you to join the downtrodden. Best you accept your lot rather than dangle your cock at the goddess of fortune. Alea is a spiteful bitch and her cunnus; the folds are wet and inviting, aio, but barbs infest her sheath.”

Thalarus chuckled with false humor. He went forward and slung an arm around his trainer and friend. “Come. Take me to the gate. I wish to watch the fight preceding mine while you wring freedom from my kin.”

The corridor too narrow for walking in tandem reeked of dankness. The floor—its original stone since repurposed and supplanted by timber—sagged under his and the ludimagister’s weight. Walls and curved ceiling naked of limestone presented dull brick. Thalazar hung back, casting glances to his right, at the slaves and criminals hunched two or three to a holding compartment. For months they prepared. At the cusp of a defining moment, why cower in shadows instead of standing at the arched doorways, clamping and rattling the bars that stayed them?

Fear. Palpable.

He shook his head, snickering. Here mere minutes remained until he navigated the road separating the physical from the incorporeal and he bordered on pissing himself because of exhilaration.

The ludimagister led him round a bend where he paused, hairs of his forearms standing, to take in the sun coming through the grating of the gate. A guard leaned against the wall opposite the porta, awash in glaring light and twinkling at his shins. Strides later Thalarus discovered the twinkles were due to the tips of curved short-swords the guard bobbed in slight measures.

“Custos,” the ludimagister said, “meet Thalazar. Freeman. Wishes to watch the match preceding his.”

The guard nodded. “Callide.”

Thalarus almost failed to hear the ludimagister say, “I will see to your frater.” He hobbled with stiff knees to the portcullis. Like a child who wanted a treat but feared getting chastised for taking it, he put his fingers to the rusted metal. Breathed deep the fresh air and intended to seek out his brother, but the sand of the squared arena affixed his stare. Once it seemed he had inspected every pebble, he adjusted his gaze to take in three ashen walls. Scratches and stains. Here were chips from sharp edges. There, dents. Born of helmets? Clubs?

Flails perchance.

Across from him, another gate, the darkness behind it impenetrable.

An orator announced a match between women. Thalarus grinned, bounced foot-to-foot as female fighters struck with their blades and missed, pirouetted and reposed, stabbed and found purchase, cursed a participant for failing to use her clipeum—a small, circular shield—for bludgeoning, and cheered in appreciation after she loomed over the other, dagger poised for the kill until the game’s editor allowed the loser to survive, calling out, “Missum.”

“Here,” grunted the custos and handed to Thalarus the cinacae.

Never had anything—including a lover’s hand bracing his or the softness of a breast—gratified more than the cinaci hilts. He squeezed the leather-wrapped handles and tapped the pommels together in time with the orator’s cadence; slow and dramatic to incite the masses.

The custos pulled on a hanging rope next to the gate. A bell rang.

Chains rattled.

Portcullises rose.

Thalarus strode out into the sun, onto the sand. He thrust his weapons skyward. The crowd's roar muted his bellowing.

"You!" He pointed a cinacum at the beefy foe sauntering across the arena and outstretched his other arm. He wove the second blade inward, gesturing to himself. "Veni."

The bear carrying the flail and scutum growled, loped. The flail's head—a morning-star styled after a skull with spikes coming out the crown and face—arced up and behind the brute. When the spiked head began to come forward, Thalarus bolted at Bear and twisted to bump the assailant's arm with his shoulder, then rammed his elbow upward, beneath the helmet into the underside of an exposed chin.

"I," Thalarus shouted, tramping backwards, "would know you."

The helmet muffled Bear's reply. "Halwyn."

A non-national. "Did debt or crime deliver you here?"

"Dice and drink."

Thalarus spread his arms wide and bowed. "To your losses."

He remained bent over, staring at the sand, wishing the crowd's furor decreased and better allowed him to hear Halwyn's running before his massive shadow came into view. Thalarus dropped and rolled. In coming to his knees, he sliced the exposed upper portion of his opponent's calf. Halwyn limped to a stop. He hefted the scutum, his chest heaving behind its armor, again reared the flail and charged while Thalarus basked in uproar that wrought tingles throughout his body.

The morning-star came whisking.

Too late did he understand its threat was meant to distract. Halwyn's shield—wooden except for the band holding slats together—knocked him facedown. Spikes gouged his back. Screaming, Thalarus trundled until bumping a wall. There, bounded to his feet, glimpsing a silvery flash. And ducked under Halwyn's flail whizzing overtop. Splinters from the fractured wood peppered his cheek.

Another glint. A long edge. Honed.

No chance to dodge the shield.

He twisted his wrist so the back of a cinaci blade impeded the scutum before he put a sole to the wall for leverage and shoved at Halwyn's breastplate. That gave him the space he needed to knee Halwyn's groin once, twice. With every bit of his might, he lashed out with a heel at the shield to knock it away. He kicked again—this time at the iron-covered torso.

Halwyn, faltering, swung the flail wide in a desperate sweep. Thalarus spun from harm's trajectory. His diagonal cut slashed flesh, a leather strap. No more breastplate. The twin sword he thrust sideways between scapula and spine. The cinacum's curve, at that angle, drove the tip into Halwyn's lungs, who wheezed and crumpled.

Silence filled the quadratum; conceivably over the fight ending with an expert strike—that of an assassin—executed by an amateur, the smaller and less protected combatant the victor. Someone behind Thalarus started clapping. He turned, suspecting the person was his brother.

The game's editor rose inside the podium that hosted the eminent. His complexion reddened and white toga fluctuated with his stomping that spurred the crowd into doing likewise. "Exquisitus!"

Thalarus dropped his cinacae. He outstretched both arms, as if they were wings and he prepared to soar off the quaking ground.