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CHAPTER

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Twenty-Seven

While Xander had tried to get help from the bonehead who'd had his soldiers attack him, the gladiator had closed the distance between them. When he looked away, the big man made a sharp turn to cut him off. His feet skidded out from under him, and he went down. The crowd let out a loud and sustained "*booooo!*"

Xander didn't wait to see what happened next. He sprinted the length of the arena, skirting bodies and body parts.

Once again, he reached a large wooden door and pounded his fists on it. He wondered how many of the dead men on the ground around him had done the same thing. This wasn't going to work.

He spied the gladiator jogging toward him. He couldn't play keep-away forever. He'd seen the movie: they'd do something to make sure he was caught. Somehow—maybe with chained wild animals or legionnaires with razor-sharp blades—they'd shrink the area of combat until he had no choice but to face the gladiator.

He ran to the nearest body—a boy not much older than Xander. The wounds made Xander fall to his knees and vomit. His panic had kept his stomach from betraying him until now. Once he'd decided to defend himself, his mind became more rational. And any rational person would have puked at the sight.

The crowd cheered with delight.

Xander wiped his mouth on his bare forearm. He spat and crawled over to the dead boy. It seemed that death had not relieved him from the desire to possess a weapon; the boy's hand held firm to the handle of a mace. Xander pried his fingers open, feeling his stomach lurch again at the stiffness of the corpse's joints. He lifted the powerful weapon, which consisted of a stocky handle, a length of chain, and a heavy shot put—like metal ball tricked out with spikes.

He clambered up. His right arm was heavy and slow, weighed

down by the chain mail and mace. He used both hands to lift the weapon. He hefted it and swung it to his left. The ball moved sluggishly, as though Xander were trying to fight underwater.

The gladiator approached.

Xander pulled the handle to his right. The ball swung with it. He had to throw his hips back to avoid being hit by his own mace, but he thought he had figured something out. Once the ball was moving, it didn't want to stop. All Xander had to do was get it going and steer it. He pumped his arms, as though he were stirring a vat of molasses. The ball swung out in front of him. It came back to his left side. When it swung out again, he pulled it toward his right. This kept the ball swinging in a semicircle around him. The problem was, he couldn't get it higher than his stomach. Still, the gladiator seemed intimidated by this display. Perhaps he believed it was a cunning trick to lure an unsuspecting foe near, at which point a fancy flick of the wrist would send the ball skyward and down on the opponent's head.

*If only*, Xander thought.

The chain, kept taut now, did not make the *chinking*, chainlike sound Xander expected. It was the ball that emanated the sound of danger, with a *whoosh-whoosh* as it cut through the air. At his right ear, the chain mail's metal rings scraped together, reminding Xander of pebbles dropped onto a metal slide. These sounds, and the grunting of the gladiator, occupied Xander's auditory sense. The crowd had ceased to be. Xander was in a zone that maybe his brother would understand on a very minimal level

because of his gaming acumen: two combatants . . . life and death . . . nothing else mattered.

Focus would make him better than he was. Still, he was outmatched. The gladiator possessed skill and experience and bloodlust and the strength to turn these things into a killing machine. The way he glared at Xander, Xander realized he was also focused—focused on bringing down this last stubborn opponent.

As the mace reached its leftward apex, Xander heaved up on its handle. The ball arced up. It passed in front of Xander, level with the gladiator's head. This potentially fatal move was impressive . . . and completely unsustainable. As it swung out, it dropped heavily, all the way to the ground. It took Xander with it, yanking him off his feet, like a novice water-skier. He tumbled over it and wound up on his stomach, staring up at the gladiator jogging toward him. The man was laughing.

Xander scrambled to his feet and ran. He had decided to take a stand, but now was no time to learn how to use a new weapon. Especially one as exotic as an ancient mace. To his untrained and underdeveloped arms, it was nothing more than an anchor. If he had tried that last move while the gladiator was moving in for the kill, Xander would be dead now.

He spotted another body at the far end of the arena and turned toward it. The chain mail on his arm was heavier and heavier. Wearing it was like carrying an anchor. As his feet dug into the sand, he unlashed the strap under his arm and let

the chain mail fall away. As much protection as it provided, he needed agility more. Besides, it may have prevented a blow from that gladiator's sword from cleaving off his arm, but without doubt, such a blow would shatter his bones. In agony, without the use of his arm, the gladiator's coup de grâce would have come swiftly.

Xander skidded next to the damaged body. A sword lay in the sand beside it. The handle was sticky with blood.

*All the better to keep my grip*, Xander thought. He stood and faced the gladiator, who had closed the distance faster than Xander had expected. Xander swung the sword in front of him and screamed. What came out was guttural and animalistic and represented exactly what he felt inside.

The gladiator sneered. It was the same twisting of the lips Xander had witnessed on the faces of countless bullies. It dawned on him that the gladiator was a bully to the extreme.

The man lumbered forward.

Despite his resolve, Xander took a step back. Then another. The top of a round boulder protruding from the sand caught his attention. Of course, it couldn't have been a boulder: Just beneath the sand of the coliseum arena was a wood floor. Under that was the hypogeum, tunnels and rooms where the amphitheater managers kept slaves and animals before spitting them out for the entertainment of the crowd. The "boulder" was a shield. He sidestepped over, stooped to pick it up.

The gladiator rushed in.

Something prevented Xander from gripping the strap behind the shield. The gladiator loomed over him, raising his sword. The weapon disappeared in the brightness of the sun. With no time to wield it perfectly, Xander dropped his sword and clutched the perimeter of the shield. He lifted it over him and ducked his head under it. The gladiator's sword slammed into the shield. It felt as though Xander were trying to hold back a battering ram. Metal clanged. The impact rattled his hands and vibrated up his arms to his shoulders. Instant pain.

*But nothing like it could have been, he thought. Nothing like the sting of death.*

With the shield pushed down onto him, he saw the reason he could not wield it properly. Another arm was already in the shield's straps. It had been severed mid-bicep, at the edge of the shield. The dead fingers waggled at Xander, as if bidding him farewell.