

Writing On the Wall

Claudius was running. Bolting through the thickening trees fringed with creeping, growing shadows. The clouds above him were blackened with the ominous, oncoming storm, forming a swirling obsidian abyss that bathed the late evening in sinister darkness. One wrong move, and he would be sucked into its endless, torturous depths. His heart boomed in his chest, thundering so loudly that the shouts behind him became almost inaudible. The overgrown track forked suddenly. Claudius blanched. His legs tremored with exhaustion, arms trembling from purple, mottled bruising. Deafening footsteps pounding behind him sent electrifying courses of adrenaline shooting through his veins. He couldn't run forever from the Lanista, the gladiator trainers, but could hide. Thoughts raced through Claudius's head as he tore through the forest, which seemed to be closing in around him with every branch that whipped by his face. Claudius was a Laquearius, the fastest and most agile of the gladiators. He had left his battle-scared shield behind, but his silver tipped trident was still strapped to his back with a fraying leather cord. It glinted wickedly in the slivers of moonlight penetrating the pine trees' needles. Claudius's breathing turned ragged, and his muscles spasmed. All hope was fading from his deathly exhausted body. He would have to stop eventually, and the Lanista would find him.

A gradient pallet of soft, pale colours caressed the rising sun with gentle fingertips, tinting the midnight-blue canvas of night with the relieving signs of dawn. Silhouetted against the lightening sky was the most stunning sight Amber had ever seen. The Colosseum stood magnificently with more grandeur than film could ever capture, and Amber found herself in awe of the ancient wonder rising proudly in the midst of the bustling city of Rome. A cool breeze wound lazily through the crisp Autumn air, billowing the various Italian flags that flew proudly above the streets surrounding Italy's most famous landmark. Alongside the Colosseum, the Roman Forum formed part of one of the most famous skylines in the world. It seemed to Amber that she had read thousands of books in the fourteen years she had been alive, and most had been about ancient Rome. It was her sole mission to wander the underground maze of secret corridors and tunnels under the Colosseum. And now she was finally there. And she wouldn't leave until she unearthed the buried secrets of Ancient Rome. The secrets that were never meant to be found.

When Claudius awoke, it was pitch black. He was lying spread-eagled on a soft bed of pine needles, body aching, head clouded with pain. He lay for a while, gazing up at the sky. A light rain began to fall, coating Claudius in a misty sheen. His thick, dark hair was soon plastered to his forehead, like a cool, refreshing cloth pressed against hot skin. Claudius slowly arose, swiftly scanning his limbs. Thin white scars, deep cuts still oozing blood and blackened bruising marred his olive skin, souvenirs from his deadly escape, made only twelve hours before. Or maybe it had been longer. Days, weeks, months could have passed while he lay unconscious on the ground, in the depths of the forest at the back of the Ludus Magnus, where he had lived and trained for as long as he could remember. A menacing sound interrupted his thoughts. Claudius held perfectly still, ears straining to hear the rapid thuds of horse hooves drawing nearer. And then a voice spoke. A voice that turned Claudius's blood to ice. The Lanista were not the only ones tracking him. Emperor Domitian was too. And they were coming.

Amber's plan was working. She had slipped away from her tour guide and entered the Colosseum's restricted zone; the subterranean network of tunnels that were still too dangerous for public access. Amber moved hastily and soundlessly through the rock passages, following the dim light emitted from flickering bulbs suspended from the ceiling. She left the main tunnel and entered a small room cut into the wall. Stagnant-smelling water dripped from the roof, and the stones were a gritty grey. Writing covered every surface, carved roughly by hand. The sweat on Amber's neck turned cold as she mentally translated one section of the Latin.

It is my trial today, forty days after I was captured. I fear this will be the last time I write. May Jupiter be with me. Claudius Geminus.

Amber was stunned, frozen in overwhelming shock. His last name was Geminus. So was hers.