

THE WARNING ...

Decimus Rex awoke, cold. He could remember little of the battle with Aritezu in the cave, and his mind swam with a blur of different images. He was dimly aware of a dull, throbbing pain somewhere in his midsection, but this was like background noise ... and seemed, at times, to vanish completely.

The world had turned a curious shade of white, and Decimus found himself unable to move properly. When he climbed to his feet and tried to advance, it felt as though he was wading through deep sand. The light burned his eyes, and he had to shield himself by thrusting a hand in front of his face.

Then a familiar voice said 'Decimus?'

A shadow blocked out some of the piercing light.

It was quite obviously Gladius, as the outline of the big slave was unmistakable.

'What happened?' Decimus managed, his breath heavy. 'I can't move properly. Is this ... a dream?'

The shadow shifted slightly, but was still nothing more than a dark shape.

'You've been badly wounded, Decimus,' said the voice of his friend. 'You're dying.'

As the words found his ears, the pain in Decimus's side suddenly intensified, becoming almost unbearable before it died away again.

'C-can't you help me?' he stammered.

'You mean Gladius? Oh ... I'm afraid he's not there yet - but he is on his way.'

Decimus blinked several times, but the light was still blinding.

'If you're not Gladius,' he said, weakly. 'Who ARE you?'

The light grew even brighter, while the shadow darkened slightly.

'I am someone who watches over you, Decimus ... and not only you. Just think of me as a friend to those who are in peril. I come to the fallen, who have reached the time of their death - either to help them reflect on their lives or to advise them of the dangers still to come.'

Decimus collapsed back onto what he thought of as the sand, and his eyes filled with tears.

'Am I to die now?' he said.

The figure darkened even further, though the outline around it grew brighter still.

'No, young Decimus: you will survive ... but you will face a great and terrible danger, one you cannot yet see

and one that will unbalance and test the strength of your friendships.'

As Decimus felt the throb in his midsection grow more and more painful, he started to lose consciousness again and a weakness stole over him. Fighting the urge to sleep, he gripped two handfuls of the substance at his sides and began to grind his teeth.

'What danger?' he pleaded. 'I need to know! I have to - to - to prepare. Please - you must t-tell m-me. I should kno-'

The figure loomed in close to the fallen boy, its shifting shadow now merely a black void in the world.

'You are about to be betrayed by someone you call a friend.'

The words came out strong and bold but they were spoken too late for Decimus to hear, as the world was calling the young gladiator back to life ...