

Gladiator

I have money, power, women, slaves, everything a man could ask for. The people love me, they want to be me. I spend my days training young criminals how to fight, to prepare them for the arena. I try to give them the best chance of survival. I teach them everything I know but no matter how much training and effort I put into these god-forsaken people, not one of them has survived the arena to be awarded their freedom. I watch as their bodies are brutally cut down by tigers, bears, lions and fellow men. I hear the blood curdling screams as they are being mauled or hacked to pieces. I watch their blood soak into the sand, a permanent reminder of yet another failure, another loss of a wretched life. Watching my students being killed puts a toll on me mentally and makes me think back to the time when I was once one of them. A gladiator..!

The memories come flooding back. Of being curled up in a ball eating a small piece of bread. It is stale, mouldy and smells like goat's vomit but it is all I have for dinner and I realise if I don't eat it I will probably not have enough strength to search for my next meal. The following morning I am roaming the streets looking for my next victim. I see an old woman. Grey hair, wrinkles, very weak and defenceless. She is wearing a white tunic and brown sandals. She carries a brown basket filled with food and hopefully somewhere in there is some bread or some money. I follow her until there is no one is around and I make my move. I run up to her and try to grab her basket. Unexpectedly, she holds on for dear life and screams for help as I push her to the ground and try to run. "Help! That boy has stolen my bag!" she screeches. I turn to make my escape and THUD, I run straight into the strong arms of a Roman soldier! He grabs me and the contents of the basket spills everywhere. An orange bounces off down the cobbled street. "You're coming with me," grunts the soldier. He drags me back to the old woman and asks "Is this the thief?" The old woman replies "Yes. Throw him in the Arena. I will have great pleasure seeing him being mauled to death by a filthy animal." My stomach drops. I know that is certain death. In a short time I will be just another meal in an animal's stomach. I hope my death will be quick and not too painful.

My jail cell is horrible. I have to share it with four other boys about my age. Some people are crying and pleading for forgiveness. They are almost hysterical, while others are totally withdrawn and silent. I don't know which is worse, the hysteria or the empty stares. Our jail smells like vomit, urine and faeces. It is overwhelming with the heat and sweaty bodies combined. The conditions are atrocious. We are starving and it's like we are in a living hell. Finally, the guards let us out into the courtyard where some important looking men in togas are walking around and picking out people. I wonder if it is a good thing to be picked out or a bad thing. I am poked and prodded and asked to perform some physical tasks. The men in togas seem to have a big discussion about me then I am dragged over to a group of men who are quite big and very muscular. They are from all different places. Some are Roman thieves like me, others are from Britannia, Gaul, Carthage, Egypt, Arabia, Greece and Hispania. There are some

boys who also look sixteen years old like me. The men in the togas shout out "Done!" All the soldiers step back into the shape of a circle around the group of men that haven't been chosen, pull out their pilums (spears) and start throwing them into the unfortunate rejects. There are screams and cries as more and more of the men are being slaughtered. Some in our group run at the Romans and try to tackle them but are killed within an instant. The guards march us off and as I look back I see they are dragging the bodies away and throwing them into a fire. We are led off into our new cells which are actually clean and solitary. I can smell the horrible stench of the burning bodies. I wish them well in their next life.

On our first day of training we are given wooden swords and are made to hit wooden dummies. We go for twenty mile runs and if any one falls behind they are killed. We train nine hours a day only stopping for lunch and small breaks. The food is the best I've ever had. There is chicken, fish, and beef. The food's not particularly fresh but it feels like a banquet. When the doctors think you are at your physical peak they send you off to fight in the arena. In my two months being here about a quarter of the men in the group have been killed. While I'm in my cell one of the doctors comes in and starts to measure me and I have to undertake many hard physical tests. As the doctor leaves the two guards start to drag me out of the cell. "Where are you taking me?" I scream. The doctor replies, "It is your time to fight. You're at your physical best."

The guards carry me to a horse and cart where they take me down the streets of Rome to the arena. There are shops selling fruit, vegetables and meats. The smell of sweet, fresh lemons makes me salivate. Children are playing, running around having fun chasing each other. People are standing in groups, deep in conversation while soldiers prowl the streets searching for trouble. The cart pulls up alongside the arena. The guards push me out of the cart and take me indoors. As soon as I enter I am overwhelmed from a rotting smell and I nearly vomit from the stench. "That'll be you soon", chuckled the guard. I'm being taken down a dark corridor. There is moss growing in-between the cracks of the bricks. I walk past cells full of people. As I am taken down further I see lions, tigers, bears, elephants and some other strange animals I have never seen before. We walk up to an empty cell at the end. "This is your cell for the night", the guard says. "You fight tomorrow." The cell is dirty and has two beds attached to the walls. I lie down on one of them. It is one of the most uncomfortable things I have ever slept on. But somehow I manage to fall asleep.

The guards get me up and put my armour on. It is leather with some horses engraved on the front. They give me a sword and a tiny shield and take me down the long, dark corridor. The guards take me up the stairs to a door, it opens. They push me out into the open. The light blinds my eyes and as they refocus I see a boy who looks about 14 years old. He has a sword, a small shield and is wearing the same sort of armour as me. He is quite skinny, has orange hair and hazel eyes which are wide with fear. He looks absolutely terrified. His legs are trembling and it looks like they are about to give way. "Today we have a match in the arena between two new competitors. One is a Roman thief. The other, a Gaul chieftain's son. Let the match begin!"

I slowly walk towards the boy. I am very nervous but this is what I have trained for and nothing will stand in my way for freedom. I charge at the boy. I swing my sword but he blocks it with his shield. He swings at me but I step back and he misses. I lunge forward and quickly slash his shoulder with my sword. Blood spurts out everywhere, even spraying me in the face. The boy screams out in despair and falls onto his knees. As I am about to drive the sword through his back, the now desperate boy spins around and slices his sword through my left thigh. Blood gushes out of my leg. It is a very deep cut nearly hitting the bone. A blood-curdling scream escapes from my lips. The pain is immense. The adrenaline starts pumping through my veins. The boy, still on his knees, pulls his sword back ready to plunge it through my chest. As he thrusts his arm forward I jump off my right knee over his sword, point my sword out and tackle him. My sword goes straight through his neck. Blood pumps out of his neck, soaking into the sand. I pull my sword out of his neck. He is barely alive, coughing up blood and gasping for air.

I look to the emperor who is standing on the balcony. Many of the spectators are pointing their thumbs down. The Emperor puts up his hand and everyone goes silent. He points his thumbs down and the crowd goes wild. I know what I must do. I lift the dying boy up by his hair, place my sword at the back of his neck, lift the sword up and slice down. This moment will be forever imprinted in my memory. The horror of what I have just done overwhelms me. I try to justify my barbaric actions by telling myself it was kill or be killed. Guards run onto the field and drag me off. Other guards are dragging the remains of the boy. They take me to one of the doctors who stitches me up and bandages my leg. I go back to my cell and start sobbing knowing that in a month I will have to do the exact same thing and this will be repeated over and over again.

Ninety-eight battles later, I am readying myself for the final battle. Nothing can stand in my way. I am 'The Conqueror'. All I have to do is win this one battle and I am free. I have battled the strongest opponents the Romans could find and defeated them all. I've fought the most ravenous wild animals in the world. Surely no person or beast can defeat me? I have so many scars on my ravaged body I cannot count them. I put on the exact same armour that I wore on my first fight, all those years ago and carry my faithful sword and shield. I walk up to the door, the guards open it as the crowd goes wild. I walk onto the field waiting for my final opponent. Freedom is in my grasp. The doors open on the other side and out strides two tall, muscular men carrying an arsenal of weapons. They are wearing metal armour, leather pants and cylinder shaped helmets with a thin, horizontal slit across the middle to see through. But what shocks me the most are the two ferocious lions following behind them. The Romans are obviously determined to see that I don't succeed in my quest for freedom. "Today we will see the ultimate battle between two champions from the recently conquered Germania verses Rome's greatest gladiator of all time – The Conqueror. If he wins he earns his freedom. Let the match begin!"

Almost immediately the two lions charge. The first one pounces but I move to the side and slash its stomach. The second lion swings its paw but I manage to block it with my shield. I pull my sword back and thrust it through the beast's head. Two down, two to go I think to myself. The two champions surround me, readying to throw their spears. I roll to the side and both of the spears miss me so they draw their swords and charge. They are coming from in front and behind me. They both swing their swords and I duck. As I duck, both swords slice over me and amazingly one of the steel blades hits the other in the face. His body drops down beside me. He is dead. The last champion screams, swings his sword but misses. I struggle back onto my feet. My opponent swings again but I manage to block it with my shield. He spins around to my side that, to my horror, is vulnerable and slashes my rib cage. He pulls back his sword and plunges it through my thigh. I scream as I am kicked to the ground. He takes off his helmet making it easier for him to finish me off. He has an air of arrogance, confident now that he will finish me off and be the victor. He lifts his sword readying for the final strike. He looks to the Emperor who sticks his thumb down. The crowd boos with disappointment. I see my bloody sword just out of arm's reach. If I could just grab it I could still have a chance. My opponent looks down at me with utter contempt and grunts "Sweet dreams in Hell", as he swings his sword down. With all my last strength I roll my weary body to the side, pick up my sword from the blade end and throw it. Time seems to slow down as it spins through the air. I close my eyes and pray to Jupiter to be free. When I open them I see the sword in the man's head as he falls to the ground. He is dead, I am free!

So here I am. Every now and then I think about whether it was worth stealing from that old woman and if I could travel back in time would I still choose to steal that basket? But the answer is always yes because I would never have had the wonderful life that I have now. I am awoken from my day-dream by my son tugging on my sleeve. "Father, Father," he says, "when I grow up I'm going to be the best gladiator in the whole wide world." I look down at my young son, the centre of my world. "Even better than me?" I ask. He looks up at me with those large, brown innocent eyes. "Of course Father," my son replies, "even better than you!" I laugh and ruffle his mop of brown hair. "Father, show me your famous move. I want to see your sword throw again." With a sigh, I get up out of my chair and walk over to the training arena with my son skipping behind me. For yet the thousandth time I grab my sword and aim it at the target. My son squeals with delight as I throw the sword and it goes spinning through the air. Bullseye!

By Ethan Cha 8S