

GLADIATOR

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CHAPTER 1

Gasps filled the air when I landed on the ground with a hard thud. I couldn't see my opponent from the dust that sifted through the air, and as I heard the clang of metal becoming louder, I knew I was done for. I was going to die, and Brutus was going to make it to the final Gladiator battle.

"Surrender!" a booming voice bellowed from the large silhouette standing over me.

The tip of his sword pointed dangerously towards my neck, ready to pierce through in a moment's notice. My sword was out of reach and I had no way of escaping. *Am I actually going to lose? Brutus is very convincing...*

I thought about my wife and son, and how they were completely innocent and didn't deserve to suffer the life of a slave because of me. I told them I was going to free them, and that's what I was definitely going to do.

"No." An inner strength fuelled me as I suddenly gripped hold of the blade of Brutus's sword and pried the weapon from his grip.

"I can't lose. Not to you, not to anyone."

I slowly stood up as the dust cleared, and Brutus's sweaty brick figure in front of me was revealed. He was bleeding on his arms where I struck him earlier on in the battle, and his left eye was beginning to swell; but despite his injuries, he was still ready to continue.

"Fight me like a real man with honour; no weapon!" I demanded.

Brutus's eyes, once dull and tired were suddenly inspired by my words, and lit up excitedly as a new energy flowed through him. When the energy reached his mouth, a broad grin appeared, and I imagined that if it were any other situation, he would let out a hearty laugh.

"Now *that's* the Gaius Romethetus I know!" he declared enthusiastically.

I stood my ground as he ran towards me eagerly, and braced myself for the impact. *Three...* *Two...* Brutus was nearly within arm's reach. *One.*

In a swift movement, I swung my leg towards him, aiming for his knee, but instead collided with his solid shin. The attack didn't seem to affect him, and he quickly retaliated with his first planned move; a shove and punch combination.

I stumbled back from the force of the shove, but saw Brutus's fist just seconds before it reached me and quickly ducked.

"This match... will be over soon... if you keep fighting like that!" I teased in between breaths and dodging his blows.

"And that will be because I win!" Brutus declared.

His next punch slammed into my chest and I heard a loud crack as a sharp pain began to pierce my skin. It was an agonising combination of a throbbing deep bruise, like a heard of sheep was trampling on my chest; and a stinging sensation as though someone was continually dragging a blade across my body. And as the area became increasingly warmer, the pain sent goosebumps all over my body and caused an immediate throbbing headache. The excruciating pain told me I had broken my collarbone.

"Argh!" I cried out in pain as I placed my hand on the injury. Brutus stopped attacking and watched me stumble away as the audience whispered excitedly.

"Gaius, there's no way you can win now. Do you surrender yet?!" he yelled triumphantly, stirring up the crowd.

At that point in the battle, I couldn't tell if Brutus was being serious with his threats and the fight, or whether it was all for show. *Did he forget our promise?*

"Brutus, there's something you keep forgetting about me." I spoke as I walked back to my opponent.

"When I'm fighting for something, I don't give up." I looked him in the eye.

"Now, let's finish this."

This time, I was the one who raced forward and made the first move. Brutus and I had been training together before the Gladiator Games started, and in between the tournament, so I knew where his weak spots were; and it was time to use that to my advantage.

I first ducked to dodge the punch I knew was coming, and then I quickly kneed him in the gut. As he leant forward from the powerful movement that winded him, I pulled his face forward and kneed him again; this time more to disorient him than to apply pain.

As he struggled to clear his head, I raced behind him and kicked the back of his knees, forcing him to collapse. He was heaving and gasping for air as blood oozed from his mouth, and I bent down and gripped the back of his sweaty black hair to make him look me in the eye.

Under all the damage, Brutus looked relieved that I had taken the upper hand. He couldn't speak, but the faint smile I saw spoke a thousand words.

"Thank you for everything. I will repay you when I win." I spoke softly.

I smashed Brutus's head into the ground one last time, and he didn't get up. I stood up and watched him for a few seconds to confirm that he was unable to fight; and when the crowd realised he wouldn't rise, the colosseum erupted in cheers.

"I did it... I made it to the end..." I whispered to myself before all my energy left me and I, too, collapsed.

CHAPTER 2

Celebrations were lively that night. No one expected me to defeat Brutus, and they were all excited to see how I would fare against Markus Tiberius in the final match; especially when it was difficult to move my right arm because of my broken collarbone.

Excited whispers hung in the air whenever I appeared, and every now and again, children went up to me to ask questions about the fight, or just to tell me that they wanted to be just like me when they grew up. I was a celebrity and a hero in the eyes of many, which felt strange for a slave like myself.

I hadn't always been a slave, though. A few years before the Gladiator Games, I was very respected as the General of the Army and, in fact, had never done anything unjust in my life. I had everything; a loving family, plenty of friends, and fortune; even the slaves I owned thought highly of me, as I treated them better than most; but all of that changed when I came home one night to find a sheet of parchment that ordered me to stand down from my role as General, or it would happen the hard way.

I had chosen to ignore the threat, believing it to be a joke, but a few days later, I received another one that said I had three days. I kept the notes to myself and kept an eye out for general criminal activity and people spying on me, but I never found anything suspicious.

When my time ended and I hadn't resigned, there was a death; one of my colleagues and good friends, Cato, had been murdered. There were no marks, so he had clearly been poisoned. The murder was investigated and all the evidence led to me being guilty for the crime. Many citizens were shocked at the news, and soon became angry, shunning me and calling me a traitor. All because I had been framed by the person who left the parchments for me.

I explained this when I was arrested and questioned. I told them I could prove it wasn't me, but when I went to the place I hid the parchment, it wasn't there; and I could only assume that the evidence was destroyed.

Murder meant that I could be executed. Either that, or I was bound to lose my title as General, and my family and I would be ostracized and be forced to live outside of Rome. Neither option was favourable, so I tried to figure out the best solution to make it easier for my family and I to live a normal life again.

Eventually, I figured the quickest way to earn our freedom again would be to train as a Gladiator and win. If, after three years, I had won five games, I could be released, and my winnings could buy my family back if they weren't released, too. An acquaintance of mine who didn't believe I performed the murder was the lanista of a Gladiator Training School near the Colosseum, and he agreed to take me in and let me fight for my freedom. I also asked that he take in my family as slaves and look after them as best he could, and promised to give him half my winnings per win, which would be more than enough to cater for the cost of them. He said he'd only take a quarter, as he was indebted to me for saving his life a few years prior, and the deal was made; I would become a champion Gladiator.

"I've got to win this." I murmured to myself as I gazed at the stars twinkling their blessings to me.

For the first time that night, I was alone while the public celebrated; and I decided to go for a walk to clear my thoughts before someone went looking for me again.

The path I chose once I left the colosseum celebrations twisted and turned as I took the long way to my destination. The further I ventured out, the quieter the laughter and excited voices became, until it was completely silent.

Dark shadows looming over me warned me of the threats that the night brought; that anyone could tackle, mug, and murder me at any moment. I was in a relatively safe area, but even then, most sane people didn't venture out alone, just in case; but I had somewhere to be, and I doubted anyone would be anywhere but the celebrations.

When I finally reached the Forum of Augustus, the world around me was silent, and the stars glimmering down on me was my only company.

The intricate building supported by many pillars stood grandly in front of me. It looked completely different at night when there were no market stalls open and it was deserted. That didn't bother me, as shopping wasn't the reason I entered the Forum in the first place. My real destination was at the back of the courtyard to where the Temple of Mars Ultor was.

The God of War, Mars, had always played an important role in my life. When I was a child, celebrations dedicated to him were held twice a year; though the biggest took up the entire month of March, as opposed to a little bit of October.

When I became an adult and worked my way up to General, I often visited the temple alone to share my successes and thank the God of War for his assistance in battle. This time though, as I gazed at the magnificent area, I became overwhelmed with a strong sense of power, as though Mars was not only present, but he was watching and listening to me, interested in what I wanted to say. But for the first time since I was a child, I didn't know what to say.

"Good evening, oh mighty God of War," I began as I knelt to the ground and placed one hand on my chest. I closed my eyes and lowered my head before continuing.

"I want to thank you for all the support you have offered me in the past while I was General. You have helped shape me into the warrior I am today, and my skill has been proven so far in the Gladiator Games," I paused, hesitating with my next words.

"But as skilled as I am, I am afraid of losing the biggest battle of my life."

My heart began to ache as I thought about how if I lost, it would probably be because I was dead, and then my wife and little boy would be left without me, living a life of slavery.

"I can't let that happen." I said to myself as I stood up. "I am going to win no matter what it takes, and then go on to find the *real*/murderer!"

"Mars, mighty God of War~" I yelled with a new air of confidence, gazing at the Temple.

"Lend me your power just one more time for the fight to the end! Allow me to stay standing no matter how much blood I lose, or how much damage I take. Let me show the citizens of Rome just how powerful you really are!"

As my strong voice echoed though the courtyard, the wind began to stir, swirling around me; and the powerful energy I felt when I first reached the Temple of Mars became even stronger, as though the God was inspired by my words.

Soon, it felt like the energy had become a part of me, as though the God of War was living inside me. The strength was euphoric, and I came to believe I was invincible; that I could face anyone who crossed my path. I had a strong sense of bloodlust, too, and craved a fight.

“Markus Tiberius, prepare to meet your fate at the final Gladiator battle!” I shouted into the night.

There was no way I was going to lose.

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CHAPTER 3

The next day, my broken bone was aching, but the pain was overpowered with the urge to train, so I went to the training school right by the Colosseum. When I arrived, the street was clean with no evidence of the celebrations the night before, except for pools of chunky vomit sprayed by the side of a few buildings; a sign that many people exceeded their drinking limits.

As a Gladiator, drinking wasn't encouraged, so that each fighter would stay in peak condition for their battles. It was easy to tell when a Gladiator had been drinking, because even after a couple of days, their technique was sloppy. In the years that I had been training, I hadn't tasted a single sip; I couldn't if I needed to be the best.

"Gaius! What are you doing here?!" a familiar voice called.

"I need to train if I want to win the championship, Lucius." I replied.

"You need to rest or you're going to make your injury worse! Leave at once!"

"It's going to get worse anyway, at the battle!" I argued, "Besides, a little practise can get me used to the pain so it doesn't catch me off-guard when it really matters."

When I looked into Lucius's concerned blue eyes, instead of seeing the lanista I had become acquainted to in the past few years, I saw the face of the man I once saved; whose true and only intention was to return the favour of keeping me safe. Even after all the help he had offered me, Lucius still felt indebted to me. After a moment, I finally spoke in a softened voice.

"Lucius, I know you're looking out for me, but I have to do this. Please trust me; I know what I'm doing."

"I don't even know why you approached me to become a Gladiator under my rule if you're not going to listen to me." Lucius sighed in defeat. "Go on, then. But take it easy."

Although there were other Gladiators training, I chose to practise my techniques alone, using the thick wooden training palus with rotating branches instead. When I picked up a wooden training sword, the weight of it in my right hand caused my collarbone to throb from the tension, making me reflexively drop it.

"Pick it up, dammit! I have to get used to this!" I whispered to myself through gritted teeth.

The first swing was the most painful, but after a few minutes of training, I got into a rhythm and my thoughts shifted focus from my pain to the battle ahead. I couldn't believe how far I had come, and that it would all be over in the days to come. I just had to beat Markus Tiberius.

He was a free man who used to be my second in command when I was leading the Army. He had a solid mind and matched me when we sparred. After the incident, he took my place as General, and as far as I knew from Gladiator gossip, he was still in that position. *I wonder why Markus is participating in the Games when he has an army to manage...*

As time ticked on by, the pent up energy I felt urging me to fight slowly disappeared, and I finally stopped after what felt like a couple of hours. I hadn't looked at it, but I was sure the area around my broken bone was swollen and the injury was probably worse. My repetitive movements had numbed my pain within the first fifteen minutes of training, so I couldn't feel anything when I finished.

"What happened to *you*?" a condescending voice began. "It looks like you lost a fight with that palus there! If you can't beat that, there's no way you're going to beat Markus!"

"Now, now, Felix; it's rude to speak that way to my challenger. It is demeaning for the both of us." Felix mumbled an apology and stepped to the side, allowing Markus to approach me.

"Markus." I stated, looking at the armour-clad man.

I had been trained to fight with a sword and minimal armour, and Markus wore full protection as an archer. In the Games, the audience liked to see two different types of fighters pitted against each other for extra entertainment. Even without my injury, I was clearly at a disadvantage; especially knowing that Markus was the best archer in the Army and could easily shoot an arrow through my eye in just one second. It would be a challenging fight, but not impossible for me to win.

"Hello, Gaius. I thought I'd find you here."

"You were looking for me?" I asked.

"Who isn't? You fought a commendable, exciting battle yesterday, and then disappeared during the celebrations where many people wished to congratulate you. It's certainly quite a different reaction to last time you were famous, isn't it?"

"Yes." I stated flatly, which seemed to earn a smile from Markus.

"As straight forward as always, I see." He noted before looking at me curiously.

"You never liked the spotlight, even as General; so what made you choose to become a Gladiator and battle in the Games?"

"You don't need to know the reason." I answered curtly.

"Very well, then."

Markus moved closer to me until he was just inches away from my face, and as he lightly placed one hand on my right shoulder, he leant his face to the side of mine as though he was about to share a secret. His warm breath tickled along my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine.

"Don't get your hopes up about winning." He whispered, barely audible. "The public is talking about who will win the final match, and they seem to favour me. Who wants to see a murderer win; regardless of whether they are guilty or not? Although it may be your redemption victory, there will still be people wanting to go after you. Don't make the mistake of believing it will all work out."

I stiffened at his words. Something didn't seem right about what he said; as though each word was carefully selected to sound both threatening and offering a hint to an important revelation. *Does Markus know something about who framed me?*

I couldn't ask him anything while we were in the training area, as it was busy with other Gladiators hitting and dodging the protruding sticks from the palus, and sparring against one another to improve their skills. Instead, I kept quiet as Markus took his hand off my shoulder and took a step back.

"Let's give the people what they want, Gaius! Let's have an unforgettable battle!" he said loud enough for the other Gladiators to hear.

“Oh, it *will* be unforgettable, Markus.” I challenged as I stared him down.

A broad grin spread across his face and he pat my shoulder supportively in response before turning around and stalking off; snapping his fingers twice to tell Felix to follow. As I stared at his brown curly hair, and Felix’s smaller body beside him, I couldn’t help but think that today’s visit was just for show, and that there was something suspicious about his behaviour.

“Could Markus be conspiring against me?” I asked myself quietly.

I had to know what he was planning, but I had another place I needed to get to, first.

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CHAPTER 4

"Gaius, you're back." Lucius noted. "How was your training session? You didn't work too hard, I hope."

"Training was productive. Has Brutus returned yet?"

"Yes. He has been treated for his injuries and is resting in his room."

"Thank you." I replied as I walked off.

"How are you doing?" I asked Brutus when I entered the dimly lit area.

He was sitting at the edge of his bed gazing at the dusty ground with a glazed look in his eyes. Brutus was clearly deep in thought, and I began to wonder what was troubling him. As soon as I spoke, he snapped back to reality and looked at me with alarm etched into his face.

"Gaius! It's good to see you!" he smiled heartily, getting up to approach me.

"I have to warn you about something." Brutus spoke seriously in a hushed voice, looking past me to make sure there was nobody around trying to listen in.

"What is it?" I guided him back to the bed and sat beside him, staring intently at his scratched and scarred face, preparing myself for his message.

"When I was getting treated, I overheard Felix talking to someone." Brutus lowered his voice and leaned closer to me.

"He and a couple of other losing Gladiators are planning an ambush before your match with Markus."

"That doesn't surprise me. There's always one group of Gladiators that go against regulations. I'm already at a disadvantage though, with my broken bone... Do you know why they want to attack me, on top of that?"

"Rumour has it that Markus plans on killing you at the battle. I guess he wants to really put on a display for the audience."

"Well I don't plan on letting that happen. Markus will have to rethink his strategy." I stood up, eager to take on the challenge.

"Where are you going?" Brutus asked as I started to walk away. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry about me. I'm off to do what I do best; strategize." I smiled at my friend. "I'll see you at dinner."

CHAPTER 5

I spent the next couple of days planning and training for the championship. After training, my arm would ache, but when I practised, it was as though I didn't have an injury to begin with. The God of War was proving that he truly listened to my prayers; and as the powerful energy residing in me grew each day, it became clear that Mars was going to make it a battle to remember.

Finally on the day before the championship battle, I continued my routine, heading to the training centre to get some last minute practise in. This time, the atmosphere was different to the usual individual intensities, and heavy tension spread across the whole room. It seemed as though every eye was on me, and as I scanned the area, I found Brutus looking more damaged than before.

"Who did this to you?" I asked when I reached him.

"Markus's tribe." Brutus groaned. "Apparently the ambush was meant for me. But don't go after them, or they'll beat you up, too."

A deep fury I had never felt before boiled my core and began flowing through my veins. It was as though I was sharing the wrath of a God that sought vengeance for the cowardly three on one attack; and the feeling ignited an undisclosed desire for bloodshed.

"Where did they go?"

"Gaius, no. Save your energy for tomorrow." Brutus pleaded.

"Where. Did. They. Go?" I repeated with a low growl.

A flash of shock crossed Brutus's face when he heard the dangerous undertone in my voice. I had never spoken that way to anyone, let alone a close friend; but with the God of War's power residing in my body, I couldn't help but hone in on my irrational desire to go after the men and slaughter them all.

"I think they went to see Markus." Brutus responded, studying my face. "Gaius, be careful."

"I thought I told you not to worry about me." I grinned. "I'll be back. I have some training to do."

It didn't take me long to find the three men; they were at the entrance of the training building, hanging around as though they were waiting for someone.

"Felix!" I growled angrily as I stormed towards him and two other Gladiators; recruits I didn't know the names of.

"I see you found our gift. Did you like it?" he laughed.

"You're nothing but a disgrace! Three against one? With that kind of cowardice, you don't deserve the title of a Gladiator!" I raged alongside the God.

"May I just remind you that, as pointed out, there are three of us, and just one of you? Oh, and you're already injured. You're not really in a position to be picking fights." Felix stated smugly.

I took a step forward as I stared Felix in the eye, and the other two men repositioned themselves and waited for Felix's signal to attack. The God of War's powerful energy had been building up on my journey, preparing for battle, and it was finally ready to be unleashed. I was invincible, and I knew I was going to win.

"I am going to be the Gladiator champion in the Games; you shouldn't be provoking me. Even with the odds against me, I will stand undefeated."

I couldn't stay still any longer, and lunged at Felix, aiming at his face for the first strike. As he blocked my attack, the other two men hurried to either side of me. Although I was paying attention to them and their attempt to restrain me, my main focus was to take Felix out. He was trained in close combat and used to fight animals, so he was the most dangerous; but at the same time, I knew the recruits would be easy to defeat and I could get them out of the way before facing him.

I threw a punch towards Felix and quickly ducked as I debated my options; choosing to dodge the recruits who had nearly managed to grab one of my arms. A loud thud echoed when Felix's knee suddenly slammed into my face, and I stumbled backwards, struggling to remain balanced. A warm sticky liquid began to ooze down the centre of my face, and dribbled onto my lips where I tasted the familiar metallic flavour of blood. There was no time to inspect the damage when I regained focus, because the recruits were after me again; this time wielding swords.

"Good luck beating them, champion to be!" Felix mocked as they were about to swing. *The odds might be against me, I thought as I tensed up, preparing to move, but I have the God of War on my side!*

Although the two recruits swung their swords at the same time, their movement wasn't in sync. The swords were half the weight of the wooden swords used in training, and since they weren't used to the weight difference, one recruit swung too hard, and the other didn't put enough force into the movement. In that split second, I imagined that I was not getting attacked by two armed men, but that I was training and the swords were two rotating wooden paluses that I needed to dodge and get past; and with that thought in mind, I ran straight for the weapons, jumping over one sword and quickly ducking underneath the other. I felt the sharp breeze of the blade that passed my head where I just missed getting sliced, and before I could even feel the relief of pulling off the risky move, I quickly turned from my new position behind the two Gladiators and did a sweeping kick that knocked both of them over. I caught one of the swords as it fell from above me, and soon I was the only person armed.

One of the men was lying face down, trying to get back up, and I stomped on the back of his head, knocking him out. I turned to the other who was staring at me in shock wondering how I just managed to do that, and I pointed the blade at him ordering him to stay before I faced my final opponent who had been standing back to watch the action.

"That was impressive. Maybe you *do* have it in you to last at least five minutes challenging Markus!" Felix laughed as he paced towards me.

I took a step back and also began to pace, still locking eyes with the man in front of me. I had never fought Felix before, but I had watched him in the arena, and believed that he would be just as difficult to defeat as Markus. I stopped pacing and sighed. As much as I wanted to take him on to teach him a lesson, Brutus's words about conserving my energy for the championship lingered in the back of my head, and I dropped the sword that I had caught.

"This fight is over. I need to get back to training for my battle tomorrow." I stated.

"And *you* stay out of trouble." I glanced over at the Gladiator recruit watching us, and he nodded in agreement.

“Alright then, but you’re only delaying your defeat.” Felix called behind me.

After dinner that evening, I returned to my bed where I found a rolled up sheet of parchment on my pillow. I walked over to it, both cautious and curious of its contents, and sat down to open it. *‘Good luck tomorrow. Let’s give the audience what they want. – Markus’*.

My stomach dropped and I became instantly nauseous when I read and reread those words. The more I read it, the more I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. *Surely somebody is playing a joke on me... It can’t be him; can it?* My heart began to pound rapidly the more I studied each individual letter, and the parchment began to shake in my hand. *The writing... is the exact same as the threats when I was General. Markus set me up!*

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CHAPTER 6

"Eat up, Gaius. You're going to need the extra energy for your battle this afternoon."

"I know, Brutus... I'm just not feeling very hungry at the moment."

"Well you didn't eat breakfast, so I want you to have at least half of your lunch. Forget whatever's bothering you and focus on your strategy. You need to win today."

"Yes, I do. If everything goes to plan, I will get to see my family in just a few days and can pay off all my debts."

Brutus was my closest friend as a Gladiator, and we often added wagers to our sparring matches. Usually it was something along the lines of giving away a roll at dinner if we lost, but occasionally the stakes would be higher. When we learnt that we would be battling each other in the championship, I knew that Brutus wanted me to win, but wouldn't back down from the fight or go easy on me. I couldn't always win a battle against him, so we decided that if I won our last sparring battle before our big fight, he had to lose in the Games. Even though it was just a simple bet, I still felt indebted to him for honouring the promise and planned on giving him a good portion of my champion winnings; but he didn't know that, or he would refuse.

"Gaius! A word!" Lucius called just as I finished eating.

"Yes?"

"Your battle starts in half an hour. If you don't think you can do it because of your injury, you may step down and Brutus will take your place."

"I will not surrender. I am ready to battle and become the champion."

"Of course you are. Well, be ready and at the gate before your match begins." He said before leaving me to prepare.

A burning excitement flowed through my body, encouraging the God of War to help prepare my body for battle. The odds were against me, but the power flowing through me convinced me I was going to win.

"Let's do this, mighty God of War!" I whispered confidently to myself as I left to prepare.

The first thing I put on was the iron greave that would protect my left leg, strapping it on firmly; then when it was in place, I slipped my right arm though the leather sleeve of my manica, and I strapped it on across my chest. The leather rested across my collarbone, which would somewhat protect it in battle. The last piece of my armour was a well-fitted round helmet that covered my face. My face always got hot under there and made it harder to detect which direction enemies were coming from, but it would be a good source of protection against Markus. Once I put my armour on, I grabbed my sword and shield, and stood by the gate waiting for my introduction.

"Greetings, citizens of Rome and travelling spectators! Today has been magnificent so far, and full of splendid battles; but there will be none so splendid as the championship match of the Gladiator Games!" Lucius bellowed.

As the colosseum erupted in cheers, I tensed up. It was nearly time for the biggest battle of my life, and I couldn't fail. *Markus has to pay.*

"First up we have a man who became dishonoured three years ago, fighting for his freedom and earning his reputation back. His last battle was exciting. He was going to lose, with his redemption just out of reach, when he miraculously conquered his opponent with an impressive end. Here he is; the Secutores, Gaius Rometheus!"

Dust covered my view of the arena as the gate rolled up, but I continued forward out into the open where the audience's cheers of excitement bounced off the edge of my helmet, making it vibrate. I raised my sword to the sky as I faced the ground, and didn't lower the weapon until the dust had cleared from my view. It was my trademark signal to the God of War, praying for a successful battle. I had always done this before a battle as General, but I felt that I needed to do the prayer then more than ever. It was only when I lowered my sword that the spectators began to quiet down for my opponent's introduction.

"Facing him is a conqueror you all know as the best of the best; a leader, and a fierce fighter. His battles have been brutal, and not a single opponent has survived. Here is the man that truly fights to the end; the Sagittarius, Markus Tiberius!"

A horse whinnied as the audience screamed even louder for Markus's entrance, and he burst through the gate opposite me holding his bow as though he was going to fire, but holding the arrows separately. As he posed on his large brown horse that bounded elegantly for one lap around the arena, the applause turned into chants of Markus's name. When Lucius raised his hands, the cheering died down and he spoke once more.

"In a battle of high stakes, only one of these men will become this year's Champion. Who will it be; the Secutores, or the Sagittarius?" Lucius paused for a moment.

"Let the battle begin!"

Markus attacked first, shooting an arrow towards me just a few seconds after Lucius started the battle. Before I could think about what I was doing, my reflexes raised my shield to block the attack, and with a loud clang the arrow bounced away. I focused on my opponent after reflecting the arrow, and saw that he had his bow raised and his horse was trotting to the side of me. I was a sitting duck where I was and needed to make a move.

I gripped a tighter hold on my shield and paced towards Markus. If I could get close enough, I'd be able to pull him off his horse and keep the bow out of his reach; but I had to be careful because the horse could get scared and kick me at any time.

As I continued to pace forward, Markus shot at my legs and I jumped backwards, only just evading the shot as I felt the wind of the arrow shoot past me. As the tension between us increased, it was nearly time for me to make my first big move before Markus performed his. I couldn't read his thoughts as I watched my opponent's gaze, and then a wicked grin crossed his face as he kicked the side of his horse.

It galloped right past me, and I tried to slice into its leg so that Markus couldn't get behind me. I managed to give the horse a light cut, but it didn't affect the beast as it continued on its course. *No! He's not getting to my vulnerable areas that easily!* I hurriedly turned to face the horse and charged forward.

"You won't get rid of me *that* easily!" I tormented as an arrow scraped across the top of my helmet.

"I haven't even started!" he smirked.

Markus kicked his horse again and it bounded straight for me. I hadn't had many battles against opponents with horses before, but I knew that once it was taken down, it would be easier to get to my main target. *I'm nearly there! In three...* I gripped my sword tighter. *Two...* I positioned it ready to strike. *One.* I locked my eyes onto the horse where I intended to strike, ready to swing; but just before I could, Markus tugged hard on the reins and the beast in front of me rose, kicking its legs in the air.

As it raised its body, its feet kicked me backwards and I fell to the ground. My shield fell from my grip out of reach, but I still had my sword. I didn't want to abandon my shield, as it was my best protection from the arrows, but Markus's horse was about to land where I was and crush me, so I needed to think fast. Gasps filled the arena as spectators became invested in the battle, and as the beast's hooves came crashing down I quickly rolled out of the way. But I wasn't out of danger just yet.

It was a mistake to still be by the stallion's legs, and I needed to get up and create some distance between us; but the God of War had become restless and urged me to strike at its leg while I still had the chance. As I stood up, I quickly slashed my sword down in front of me, and my blade pierced into the thick muscly leg of the beast.

Its screams of pain filled the air as blood began to seep onto the floor of the arena, and the horse turned wild; wanting to escape, but panicking when it couldn't run because of its leg. I backed away so I didn't get knocked over again, and Markus tried to console the animal. In its panic it unexpectedly lifted its front legs higher than before, and flung Markus off. Its erratic movements made it another obstacle in our battle, and it became harder to aim at one another while the horse limped across the arena spilling blood from its leg all over the ground.

Finally, Markus aimed and fired an arrow that pierced right through the horse's eye and into its brain, killing it instantly. When the animal dropped limply to the ground, excited whispers exploded around us; no one had expected the Sagittarius to kill his own horse.

"You made me kill my horse." He turned to me with an evil glint in his eye. "Now I'm going to kill you, too."

Markus aimed his bow at me and quickly fired. I no longer had my shield, so I quickly ducked and put my right arm across my body, hoping the leather arm piece would soften the blow. The arrow bounced off my helmet, and before he could fire again, I charged towards the archer. He shot again and the edge of his weapon sliced into my left arm like a blade, leaving a stinging sensation as warm blood slowly began to dribble from the cut.

The look in Markus's eyes changed to something more sinister, and he looked angry with himself for missing the shot. As I got closer, I knew I would be easier to hit, but that was a risk I needed to take if I was going to beat the archer. When we were just metres apart I saw that he only had two arrows left before he needed to use the sword in his sheath. I knew he wouldn't use them until he was positive he had a clear shot, so I stopped running towards him. If I could make him think he had an easy target, then I could get him to waste at least one more arrow.

"Surrendering, are you?" Markus mocked.

"Not a chance. We are making this a battle to remember, are we not?" Markus studied me curiously as I slowly paced forward again. "Today will be the day the Secutores defeats the Sagittarius in the Gladiator Games champion battle."

Instead of responding, Markus shot his second last arrow just above my heart. I staggered backwards from the force of the blow and instinctively clutched at my wound with both hands, dropping my sword in the process.

Usually an arrow wedged into skin felt like a warm stinging sensation around the entry point, and like a rusty razor blade was embedded inside me slicing chunks into my muscles and bone, creating a sharp itch that spread across the area. This time, as my body went into shock for a moment from the unexpected protrusion, I felt weakened, and my knees gave way; making me fall to the ground.

"You were saying?" Markus tormented as he walked over to me.

Gasps from the crowd became blurred as my thoughts grew louder, and my head throbbed as my opponent triumphantly removed my helmet and raised it above his head. My vision was becoming dark and blurred, and my body was trying to pull me into a dream about my family as my breathing became heavier.

"Gaius Romethaeus is done for!" Markus bellowed; although it sounded more like a whispering voice that was fading away.

"Shall I finish him?!" He yelled to the cheering crowd as he faced away from me.

Am I dying? Now? After fighting so hard? I can't be... This can't be the end... As my senses faded away, I was left with a slideshow replaying memories across my vision as a hundred thoughts and feelings raced through my head at once. Once I lost all my senses and gave in to the pull that was tugging me into eternal rest, it would all be over. What happened, mighty God of War, Mars? Why didn't you have my back when I needed it most? I believed in you...

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" the spectators chanted louder and louder.

"Gaius Romethaeus." A deep voice stated.

Huh? Am I delusional? It sounded like someone bypassed my ears and spoke directly into my head... When I focused on the voice, a warm sensation flowed through my body and the images of my family began to fade.

"You cannot give up now. You have been a faithful follower right to the very end, and it is time to defeat this cowardly man who does not deserve the honour of being General, or the winner of this Gladiator battle. You are in no condition to fight on your own, so I will be taking over your body until it is over."

His words confused me, but at the same time I understood. *Thank you* was the only response that popped into my head; then suddenly my will was taken away, and I could only watch what was going on as though I was dreaming.

Mars snapped my eyes open and reached for my sword as he slowly picked my body up off the ground, focusing on Markus's back. He pulled the arrow out of my chest effortlessly and threw it aside; and as the God of War began to walk towards his target, the execution chants turned into cheers. He had nearly reached the archer when he finally turned around, with surprise plastered on his face.

"How are you still alive?" he asked curiously.

"You cannot kill me that easily. A bit of poison won't do much to me." My mouth spoke the God's words.

"Impossible! That was the same poison I used on Cato!" he exclaimed exasperatedly.

A collection of gasps erupted around the colosseum, and the spectators began to whisper amongst themselves. It was then that Markus realised he slipped with his words and confessed the secret he had masked for three years. I turned my attention to the crowd.

"You all heard that! *He* is the one who murdered Cato. Shall I make him suffer the same fate?"

The same chants of death echoed around the colosseum, but were this time directed at my opponent. Mars looked to where Lucius was inspecting the battle and the lanista offered a solid nod; then the God of War turned to Markus.

"Fight me like a *real*/warrior. Your cowardice ends here."

They launched into battle again, and Markus could only block as Mars's attacks as he powered forward and kept slashing into my opponent, hitting both skin and armour. Mars made Markus look sloppy and weak, as though he was a mere recruit. As the archer was forced back from the blows, he was visibly panicking as he desperately tried to figure out his next move. It was clear that he was too distracted by everything to focus properly on the fight.

The next blow thrusted Markus back even further, and he stepped back on the shield I abandoned earlier in the match. As he tried to regain his balance, the shield toppled towards my strengthened body unexpectedly, and Markus lost his footing. As he landed on his knees with his arms reflexively extended to soften the fall, his sword flew from his grip and he became unarmed. The God of War pointed my sword at him and spoke.

"Markus Tiberius, do you continue to fight?"

Catching his breath, Markus stared at the ground and quickly contemplated the question. When he finally looked up at the God standing over him, I could see a look of finality and acceptance in his eyes. He had accepted his fate, no matter the outcome. A second later, he sighed.

"No... I know when I have lost. I understand if you kill me, but please just tell me this; how did you survive being poisoned and then overpower me like that?"

"Let's just say the Gods are on my side." Mars spoke, choosing not to explain.

"Okay..." he spoke quietly. "Well, I surrender. Do what you must, mercy or no."

Markus closed his eyes and faced his head to the ground waiting to hear Mars's response. The God of War raised his sword and quickly struck down, slicing right through Markus's neck and decapitating him. The head rolled about a metre away, leaking out a trail of blood, and his body slammed on the ground, staining the dirt with the rest of his innards leaking out.

"There's no mercy for traitors." Mars spoke while the captivated audience was silenced by shock.

All of a sudden my senses returned, as though the God of War had finished his work, and I could control my body once more. Although I was in pain from my injuries, I wasn't dying from poison any longer, and I thanked Mars again for helping me; still in too much shock to comprehend that I won.

"Citizens of Rome and travelling spectators, I present to you the winner of the Gladiator Games, the Secutores, Gaius Rometheus!" Lucius bellowed.

As the colosseum erupted in cheers, I raised my sword in the air with my head lowered, just as I did during my introduction. While my sword was raised, dust swirled into a small twister around me and grew heavier as I felt the God of War's energy escape from my body. When Mars left and I was completely myself once more, the mini dust twister suddenly stopped, and I lowered my sword once more.

I did it... I finally won! Relief flooded through me as the applause helped process the fact that I won. It meant I could be free with my family again and pay off old debts; the first to Lucius, and then to Brutus. Against all odds, I won; and I had the God of War to thank for that.

"As promised, Gaius Romethaeus will be granted his freedom." Lucius appeared in the arena, walking through one of the gates.

"He has fought well and proven himself as an honourable Secutores Gladiator; but his time as a Gladiator has come to an end." Lucius turned to me after addressing the audience. "Gaius Romethaeus, it is my pleasure to present this rudis to you. May you enjoy your well-deserved freedom."

When I accepted the wooden sword Lucius offered me, I posed in prayer just as I did when I won my battle.

"I. Am. a Rudarius!" I yelled as I lowered the sword.

The sound of my name being chanted over and over echoed through the colosseum, and I reflected on my future. I was going to free my family from slavery and work my way back to my General position. I felt more powerful than ever before, as though I was invincible, and knew that nobody else would attempt to destroy my life. *I am Gaius Romethaeus, champion of the Gladiator games, and Rudarius; and I...* Suddenly I became in a dreamlike state, seeing things through my body but not controlling it.

"... am currently possessed by the God of War, Mars, once more."