

I fought at the Coliseum, or My time as a gladiator (version 1)

By Joseph Varty

I moved away from the wall, and worked my arms and legs to get of the stiffness. A few yards away from where I stood I could see the sand that covered the floor of the arena. I could see the two marks where the bodies of the dead gladiators were dragged into the tunnel and dumped onto the cart, and when full the cart would be taken out of the arena and dumped into the river Tiber. A cheap way was to get rid of the dead, in the hundred days of the games; a thousand bodies would be dumped into the river.

Near to where I stood were two large tables; the nearest one to me was full of swords that had been used. They were blunt and covered in blood, waiting to be cleaned and sharpened, ready for another day. The other tables were full of swords, razor sharp, waiting to be used. Under this table were rows of shields of different shapes and sizes, and on the wall were rows of helmets, waiting to be used.

The sound of steel upon steel come to my ears as two gladiators fought to the death. I smiled to myself; men died to entertain the masses, then a roar went off and the crowd chanted 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' and I knew one of the gladiators was down. I closed my eyes and in my mind I could see the Emperor gave the sign of life or death to the fallen man. The crows roared, and I opened my eyes. A moment later one gladiator came into the tunnel where I stood. He threw his sword onto the table and I could see the blood on the blade, next the shield, then the helmet were thrown among the rest. He walked along the passageway, back into the training school.

Well now it was my turn, my ninth fight, and with the help of the gods I will win. I, Varticus, believe this. I collected a shield, a helmet – one with large eye holes – I like to see what I am fighting. I took one of the swords from the table and along with my opponent, walked out of the tunnel into the arena. The sun was still shining and as we walked I felt the sand in between my toes. The stick man, a small man dressed in a white garment, joined us and he carrying a very long white stick, that was five to six feet in length. He was there to see fair play, to see that the rules were being followed.

As we came to where the Emperor sat, the stick man stopped and waited. My opponent and I looked up, crossed our arms over our chests and said "We, who are about to die, salute you." The Emperor rose from his chair and returned our salute. We turned and made our way back to where the stick man stood, his stick laying in the sand. My opponent and I stood at either side and faced up to each other. It was now when fear came to me, my heart was pounding and beating that fast and I thought it would come out of my chest. My mouth was dry. I ran my tongue over my lips. I could hardly swallow, my throat was that dry. For what seemed ages yet were only seconds. We waited for the white stick to be removed.

Suddenly, the stick man moved away taking the stick with him, and my opponent came at me like a bat out of hell. I moved away, first to one side, then to another. My shield took the blows of his sword, it was as if my shield had a mind of its own. For three to four minutes we fought, each of us looking for a slip, a mistake, that would seal our fate. It did not take me long to know that this was his first fight, all his six months of training had gone to waste, he was after his first kill and that was going to be me.

Back and forward we moved and I felt the sweat running down my face and dripping off my chin. When my move came, it took just a second. He stepped sideways and I brought my sword down onto his neck, just below the helmet. The cut was deep, the blood was warm as it ran onto my sword and down my arm. He staggered and his sword arm dropped showing his naked shoulder. With a scream, I brought my sword, with all my power, down onto this exposed skin, down my sword blade went, cutting all the muscle. The blood ran out of the wound as I twisted the blade and pulled it out. He dropped to his knees. I moved to the other side and brought my shield swirling into his neck, the steel edge opening a deep cut.

Now it was time for the kill. He had fallen onto his back and was lying, stretched out on the sandy floor. I thrust my sword toward his throat, but my thrust was not to be, as a large white pole held by the stick man blocked my way. I turned my head and looked at him. "Bide your kill, Varticus", he said. We looked towards the Emperor sat. He stood up and clapped his hands, and the crowd started screaming, "KILL! KILL! KILL!"

I thought at that moment, "I am just a slave, the lowest of the low, and yet the People of Rome, all thirty – forty thousand of them were like a pack of wolves, baying for blood. The Emperor ran his hand across his throat, a sign of death, and once again the stickman moved back. I thrust my sword into the opponent's throat, pulled it out, and walked away back into the tunnel, the crowd howling behind me. At the same time, a young slave boy ran passed me to collect the dead man's sword, shield and helmet and put them onto the table, following him was the stickman.

As I made my way to the training school, behind me the crowd in the arena became silent. Fear had gripped them; the men and women looked at each other and their eyes turned to the tunnel near the body of the dead gladiator. A huge figure of a man stepped out, six feet tall and with rolls of fat hanging down from his waist, but it was the mask he wore which was repulsive. It was the mask of the god of the underworld, who had come to collect the spirit of the dead body. Over his shoulder, he carried a large hammer. On reaching the body, he sent the hammer crashing down and shattered the dead man's skull, sending brain and blood running into the sand. With the spirit released, he turned and walked back to the tunnel. Two slaves ran and dragged the body through the sand into the tunnel and onto the cart.

The stickman picked another two gladiator and they followed out into the arena and death. As for me, Varticus, I was in the training school and was standing at the side of the swimming pool. I stripped and entered the water and for the next ten minutes or so I washed the sweat and blood from my body, and then left the pool. Two slave girls came and rubbed me down with rough towels and I was stretched out onto a table, and warm oil was rubbed onto my body, the soft hands massaging my muscles. I lay there and found the working of their hands was making me start to fall into a kind of sleep. A slap on my naked backside by one of the girls made me jump and the girls left smiling and laughing. I got up, put on a robe and left.

I entered my cell and stood looking around. It was small; a small bed and chair was all that was in the cell, and on the wall were my leather gear that made up the gladiator gear. I removed my robe and lay on the bed, straw covered with a blanket. As I lay there, the aftershock of the fight came to me and I found myself shivering and sweating. After a while, I settled down and just lay there with my eyes closed.

The opening of the door made me turn and look, and there stood Katrina, a young girl from the kitchen, who was responsible to serve food to the gladiators in the training school. She was tall and slim, aged about eighteen to twenty years of age. She smiled and removed her dress and stood there, naked as the day she was born. She came towards me, and I thought, 'What the hell, I live to fight another day', and reached for her.

The End.