

The Eighth Fight

I stumble into the stadium, the roars, the screams ringing in my ears. I can smell the blood from the last battles, feel it sticking to my sandals. The bile rises in my throat and burns, making me want to faint. I hear the name they gave me "Felix! Felix! Felix!"

They know me? Just as it starts to spur me on, a crescendo of chants reach over the top. "Domitius! Domitius! Domitius!". The bile rises further. This is a matter of life or death. Domitius is five times stronger than me and a head taller. I want to run away, be anywhere but here, but I stay glued to the spot. In the place I am going to die.

I'm Jay by the way. I've got, or I did have, long, lush brown hair that fell into my beaming blue eyes. They were the only, well, good-looking things about me. I'm quite small and weedy. I'm not that great at talking. I'm just an average boy, that gets average marks, in an average school, in an average town.

It's the end of a school day. I stop off at Fishy's for a small portion of chips. It may be an average town, but these are the best chips. I wasn't going to have any today, but I couldn't resist the luscious aroma as I walk past. I sit on a bench eating my salted wonders, watching everyone playing together with their friends. I don't have friends, not real friends, anyway. People tend to ignore me, so I'm used to being invisible.

I'm eating my chips thinking about the story I have to write for History, tomorrow. Something catches the corner of my eye and I turn to look. Nothing. There it is again, a strange shimmer in the air. Maybe I need glasses? I carry on eating my chips. Again! I blink, once, twice, it's still there. I stand up and look closely. It seems to be originating from the gnarled oak tree, in the quiet corner of the park. I feel an urge to investigate. As I get closer, the shimmering intensifies, almost like the air is singing to me. Suddenly, something starts pulling me towards it. I look around. No-one there, yet I still feel the tugging on my t-shirt, urging me towards the tree. I get closer and closer, then suddenly, everything is dark. I can still hear everyone dancing and playing around, it's a strange sensation. From nowhere, I'm blinded with a bright light. All the noise of the world just stops. I was, somehow, in the tree trunk.

I notice there are millions of silver buttons, each and every one of them shining bright, like they have just been polished. Is this what was giving off the light? I stare at them, wondering what they are for. As I look up I can see the different branches separating as they find their way towards the sky. Just below I can see a little hole with small grey squirrel crawling through it. It looks at me in fright, then scampers away not wanting any interaction. I look at the floor, expecting to see the roots just like I saw the branches, but instead it's a beautiful marble, cold but smooth. I admire it as my thoughts start to drift off. I wonder if it's some kind of spaceship? Or maybe it's a control centre for Russian spies! Or it could be Bill Gates' secret bunker!

Suddenly, the whole thing starts shaking. Is that an earthquake? I can barely stay on my feet. I try to hang onto the sides, but even though they look rough, they are as smooth as the marble floor. I trip and accidentally hit a button. The shaking stops and I get back on my feet.

"82 selected. Prepare for impact"

What does that mean? Prepare for impact? 82?

The tree starts shaking again, but this time feels different. It's more of a controlled shaking. This time I can stand up. With no warning, the room disappears and I start falling from the sky. I'm too confused and scared to scream. I hit the ground with a thud. That's what they meant by impact! I look around and see the same oak tree, but no-one was there. Am I dreaming? All there was, was grass and a very straight stone road. Where has the park gone? I've never seen this road before. This road isn't made out of tarmac. It's made out of stone and it has two grooves down the sides. I wonder where the road signs are? Where are the lay-bys? This road doesn't seem very safe. There must be a petrol station somewhere. I'll stop off there to see what's going on.

I start going down the road. I look around, admiring the countryside. It's so clean! I don't see any rubbish anywhere. Wherever I am they must be very strict about littering. I see a figure in the distance on a horse and cart. Why isn't he in a car? Why a horse and cart? He is coming right towards me. I decide to go and ask him what's going on. There has to be a logical reason for all this.

As he comes nearer I realise he is wearing some sort of dress. But not like a baggy jumper. It looks like he's just wrapped a bed sheet around him and put a belt around his waist. He's a bit pale and he has short light brown hair. He is wearing leather sandals with leather straps. Must be a bit uncomfortable. It looks like he's wearing a toga, that's what the Romans used to wear.

He could be dressing up for a birthday party? Or maybe I stumbled across a film set? It makes sense, with the long straight stone road and the horse and cart. He must be an actor!

I get out of the road so he doesn't run me over, but he stops just before he reaches me.

"Hi there! I was just wondering what this film is about?"

He looks at me, confused. Then says something in a different language.

"Tamquam te gladiator. Veni mecum." He grabs my arm tightly and pulls me up onto the cart.

"Gladiator? Oh I'm not an extra, I just accidentally found this. I'll get going now." I went to get out but he held me back.

"Vestra non iens usquam, et ne loquaris!" I then realise, this man is speaking Latin. This is a very realistic film set. I just don't understand why I am here.

Just then, my whole body starts feeling tingly. I look down to see that I'm wearing a toga and leather sandals, just like the man. I'm in shock at what just happened when I think to myself, what if I can speak Latin, too? I ask the man to repeat what he just said.

"Don't you understand boy! You're not going anywhere, and don't speak."
So I can speak Latin. What is happening?

As I'm letting that sink in, the man orders me to put my hands out. I'm too scared to think what he might do to me if I don't obey, so I do. He gets some chains from the back and wraps them tightly around my wrists and then wraps it around a handle on the cart. I can feel the blood being cut off and my hands going numb. Tears well up in my eyes, but I blink them away. I've got to act like a man for once.

As the man cracks the whip, to get the horse to start, I look around at all the scenery again. I see a small cluster of huts I didn't see before. They are very small with a triangular roof. No door to be seen, just a small gap. They must be peasant houses. I can't imagine rich people living in one of those. I look back at the man. He, too, was looking at the peasant houses, but in disgust. I'm guessing he is not one of the poorer people. He speeds up the horses as we go past the huts. He must really not like them. Maybe he was in that position once, forced into poverty.

We finally arrive at our destination. All I can see is a rustling crowd of ravishing Romans. That, and a massive building towering over me. It looks oddly familiar.

"That's the Colosseum!"
The man looks at me, confused.
"Colosseum?" He says "That's the Flavian Amphitheatre"

The man unties the chain from the cart and orders me to get out.

"Stay there. Lucius will be here soon"

He cracks the whip again and the horse takes him away. I stand there, not knowing what to do, when suddenly an even tighter grip forms around my arm.

"Is this all we have? A small boy. We will get you ready for the big fight. The Emperor wants a show"

A fight? A show? Then I realise. They are going to put me up for a fight to the death. Why the Roman times? Why not any other time period?

Lucius leads me inside and gives me a wooden sword.

"Your training weapon. Come, Felix."

"B-but my name isn't Felix"

"It is now."

Lucius looks at my hair and roughly runs his fingers through it. He takes out a knife and starts to hack. I watch the pieces fall to the ground. That's one of my best features, gone. I loved my hair.

Lucius takes me to a space and teaches me how to do the most damage to the opponent by stabbing instead of slashing. The thought of it makes me gag but it's either I die or I kill. I don't want to be the predator, but I don't want to be the prey. I wish I was back in 2059. I don't want this to happen. Why can't I just run away? Just a single slip up can end everything.

Lucius looks at me up and down.

"You're not strong. You're not big, you're small. You can be fast. I'm going to make you faster."

Lucius and I train all day. By the end of it, I can dodge Lucius' attempts to stab at me and be able to run around and stab him in the back in a matter of 5 seconds. Lucius then ushers me to one side and starts telling me the things I need to know

"You have a big fight in two days, against a big man. Domitius" he says. "He is strong but slow. I expect to see you here at the crack of dawn, training to beat him."

The next few days are spent running races, heaving the lifting stones, seeing how fast I can turn corners, dodging Lucius' blows and eating lots of protein and calcium. All day the same words going through my mind.

"Be the predator or be the prey. Be the predator or be the prey."

I'm busy worrying about that when I realise Lucius is talking to me.

"Boy! Come here!"

I follow his orders.

"Tomorrow is the fight. Eat. Sleep. Be ready for what's coming."

I eat the food and then get into my bed. It's not that comfortable, but from all the training, I manage to get to sleep straight away. That doesn't stop me from having nightmares. All through the night I'm tossing and turning, dreaming about killing, about being killed, about the blood. I don't know how I'm going to get through this.

Morning comes and I wake up to Lucius pacing back and forth outside my door. I get dressed into my gear and go outside.

Lucius glares at me.

"BOY! You are late! That means no training this morning. Now get over there before you miss the fight"

I give a small nod. My stomach is feeling woozy and my head is hurting. I shake it all off with the nerves. I hurry over to the amphitheatre and go down to the other gladiators. I look around at all the others, all bigger than me, all more fierce looking than me, but do they have the same weakness? Is their strength a weakness, does it slow them down?

The other gladiators come out and place their swords in the middle. I follow so I don't stand out.

"Repeat after me. I will endure to be burned."

"I will endure to be burned"

"To be bound, to be beaten"

"To be bound, to be beaten"

"And to be killed by the sword"

"And to be killed by the sword"

Those words scared me. I'm giving my consent to let Domitius kill me.

I am told that my fight is the last fight of the day. The eighth fight. I sit down on a bench, waiting and waiting for each battle to commence. All I can hear is the heavy breathing and the stabbing going on. My heart rate is going faster. My breathing is getting quicker. The eighth fight is announced.

I walk up the stairs and to the side. Domitius facing me on the other side of the arena. We lock eyes and I know he wants to kill me. He looks so much bigger than me, definitely a lot stronger. His name is announced and he struts into the arena, taking in all the applause. My name is announced, and with a harsh push from Lucius, who is standing behind me, I am able to find the courage to stumble in. My palms sweat as Domitius lunges towards me.
"Let the fight begin!"

As soon as the words are said, Domitius takes a swing at me. I dodge and it hits my shield. Again and again he tries to stab at me. I keep rolling and ducking and dodging. My palms are even sweatier. I can feel the beads of sweat on my forehead. I scratch my knee on the ground as I roll. It starts bleeding. I'm distracted for a split second, just as Domitius takes a swing at my arm. A deep gash runs all the way up my arm. I feel like screaming but that will show my weakness. I fall to the floor and Domitius takes a stab at my head. I dodge by a millimetre as he swings again. This time it grazes my ear. I'm screaming internally, begging for it to stop. I see an opening where I can get away. I seize it.

I slip through his arm, and with all my might, I am able to pluck up the courage to stab him in the back. The sword pierces through the skin as blood gushes out.

I stagger back as the audience screams and applauds. Time slows and faces blur. The ringing in my ears. The pain in my arm. I fall to the ground as they come to take Domitius' body away. My fingers wrap around a rock I find on the ground. Suddenly, everything goes black.

I wake up on a bench. I look around for Lucius, for the crowd, for the gladiators. I smell the familiar smell of salted wonders, drifting through the air. I hear the sounds of laughing children and cars going past on the road. I still feel the pain in my arm. I pull up my sleeve and see the gash. My fingers automatically go up to my hair. It's all short, but I'm here on the bench outside Fishy's Was that real?

I was the eighth fight.