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Opening extract from

Gladiator: Street Fighter

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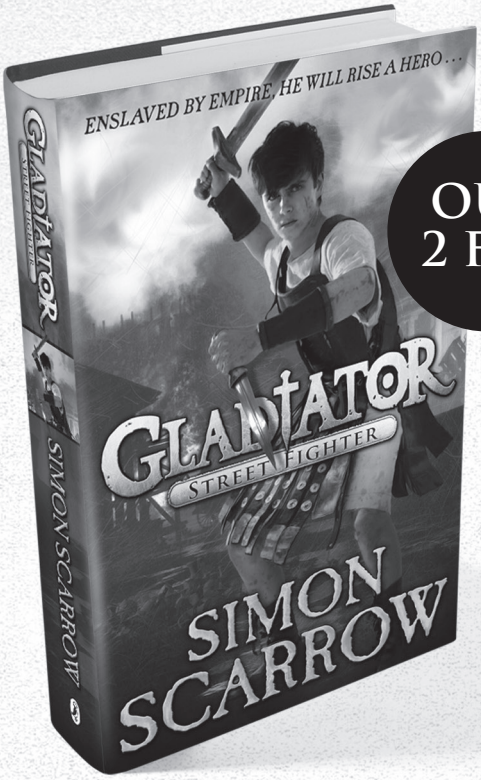
‘IT IS SETTLED.
THE BOY IS IN YOUR CHARGE.
YOU WILL TRAIN HIM TO FIGHT.
HE MUST BE ABLE TO USE THE DAGGER.
THE THROWING KNIFE, STAVES
AND HIS BARE HANDS.
BUT YOU MUST ALSO TEACH HIM
THE WAYS OF THE STREET…’



OUT
2 FEB

Marcus knew he had made a fatal mistake the moment he backed into the corner of the yard. He felt the heel of his sandal scrape against the cracked plaster of the wall, and instinctively took a half step forward to win a small space in which to move. It was what he had been trained to do at Porcino's gladiator school – always give yourself room to move in a fight, otherwise you surrendered the initiative to your opponent and put yourself at their mercy. It was a lesson that Taurus, the stern

and cruel chief trainer, had beaten into the trainee gladiators.

At eleven years old Marcus was tall for his age, and the hard training had made him strong and tough and had given him some skill with a sword. Even so, he knew the odds were against him as he faced his opponent, a wiry man in his thirties, fast on his feet and with a keen eye that anticipated almost every move that Marcus made.

Blinking away a bead of sweat, Marcus thrust aside his anxiety. He knew his only hope was to do the unexpected – something his opponent had not been trained to deal with. From the way the man moved and handled his short sword, it was clear that he'd been trained as a soldier, or perhaps even a gladiator, like Marcus. When he had drawn his sword on the boy, the man had begun with a few lazy thrusts and feints. The initial sneer on his face had quickly

faded as Marcus confidently parried his sword blows aside. There had been a brief pause as the man withdrew a few paces to cast a fresh look at his young foe.

'Not so wet behind the ears then,' he growled. 'Still, you're just a little whelp in need of a good hiding. And that's what I'll give you.' Then he closed in on Marcus in earnest and the clatter of their sword blows echoed off the walls of the courtyard. Outside, in the Rome back street that passed behind the yard, the hubbub of voices dimly carried to Marcus's ears, muffled by the blood pounding through his head. He paid them no attention and concentrated on his opponent, watching for any flicker of movement that would indicate the next attack.

The man was good. He wouldn't have lasted more than a few heartbeats against an expert like Taurus, but it was only a question of time before he defeated Marcus. Despite

the boy's quick, darting movements, the man soon edged Marcus into the corner, trapping him against the walls.

For an instant Marcus surrendered to the fear that the man would win, and cursed himself for letting it happen. Forcing the thought from his mind, he settled into a crouch on the beaten earth and cobbles of the yard. He moved his weight slightly forward so that he was poised on the balls of his feet, ready to spring forward, or aside, in an instant. His sword was held level, a short distance from his side, where it could lash out to attack or block any strike the man threw at him. His left hand reached out to keep him balanced.

There was a brief pause as they stared at each other.

Marcus was aware of movement behind the man as the figure watching from the doorway on the far side of the yard shifted his position.

As his gaze flickered aside, the attack came. With a roar, the man sprang forward and slashed his sword at Marcus's head. Marcus ducked to one side as the tip of the blade hissed through the air a few inches from his face. At once Marcus made a cut towards his opponent's sword arm and sensed a faint jarring as the edge of the sword nicked the man's skin.

With a curse, the man fell back and raised his arm to look at the wound. It was only a shallow scratch but the blood flowed freely, the droplets scoring jagged crimson lines down the man's forearm as he stared at the cut flesh. He fixed Marcus with an icy stare.

'That is going to cost you, boy. Cost you dearly.'

Marcus's blood went cold at the menacing threat, but he kept his eyes on his opponent.

The man lowered his arm, tightening

his grip in case the blood flowed into his palm and caused the weapon to slip. He strode deliberately towards Marcus, lips curled back in a vicious snarl. There was no attempt to pull his blows this time. The clash of blades rang loudly in Marcus's ears as he was beaten back against the wall. The tip of the sword struck the plaster to one side of his head, and chips exploded off the wall. The blade ripped back, high, ready to strike down on Marcus's head.

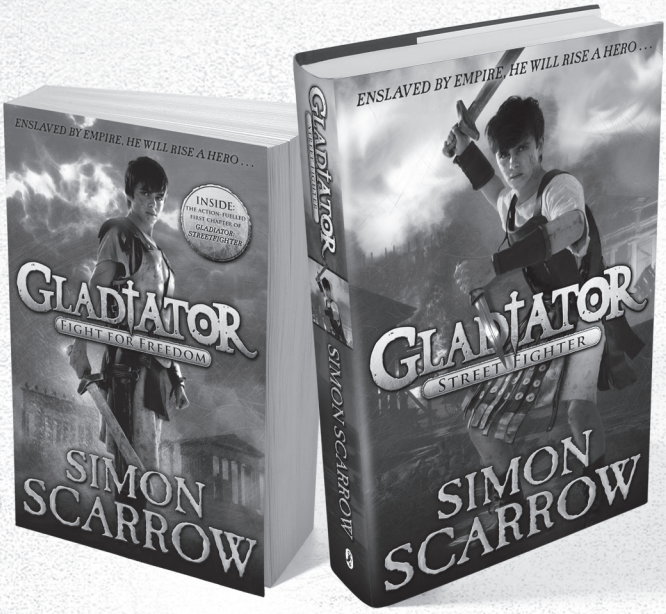
'Stop that!' a deep voice called across the yard.

But the man's blood was up and he aimed another blow at Marcus. At the last moment Marcus desperately leapt forward, inside the arc of the blade. He went low, throwing his full weight into his attack as he punched with the guard of his sword between the man's legs, into his groin. There was a deep groan and the man stumbled back with an agonized expression. He let

out a cry of pain and rage, balling his left hand in a fist as he swung it hard. Marcus tried to duck the blow, but it glanced off his skull and the impact snapped his head to the side. Bright white sparks filled Marcus's vision as his body flew through the air to land heavily, the breath driven from his lungs. He rolled on to his back, gasping, as the walls and sky spun round above him. The man lurched into view, groaning as he doubled over. Then Marcus felt the tip of a sword touch the bony notch at the base of his throat.

ONE BOY.
ONE EMPIRE.
ONE ALMIGHTY BATTLE
TO SURVIVE . . .

HE WILL RISE
A HERO.



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