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Opening extract from

Gladiator: Street Fighter

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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 in their fight.

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 with 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. The boy ducked to one side as the tip of the blade hissed through the air a few inches from his face. At once he 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 back 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. Then he landed heavily and the breath was 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.

The man's eyes narrowed and Marcus feared he would thrust the weapon home to cut Marcus's throat as the tip tore through the top of his spine. He would die, and his heart was flooded with regret and shame that he had failed to win his freedom and find his mother. She had been enslaved at the same time as Marcus and taken to a farming estate somewhere in Greece, and if he died she was doomed to end her days there. Clenching his eyes shut, Marcus prayed to the gods that he might yet be spared.

'Festus! That's enough!' the voice called out again. 'Cut the boy and I'll have you crucified before the day's out.'

There was a slight pause before the light pressure of the

sword tip eased and Marcus dared to blink his eyes open. He was cold with shock and his limbs trembled as he lay sprawled on his back in the corner of the yard. Above him he saw Festus gritting his teeth in frustration and, beyond, the smoke-smeared sky. Even though it was late in the spring, clouds hung low over Rome and threatened rain. Festus straightened up, reversed his sword and snapped it back into his scabbard before turning towards the doorway to bow his head. Marcus scrambled to his feet, breathing hard, and stood apart from Festus as he bowed too.

When he straightened up he saw the other man striding across the yard towards them, a thin smile on his lips. He stopped in front of Marcus and looked down, appraising him, and then turned to Festus, his chief bodyguard.

'Well? What do you think of him?'

Festus paused before replying cautiously. 'He is fast, and skilled with a blade, master, but the boy still has much to learn.'

'Of course he does. But can you teach him?'

'If it is your wish, master.'

'It is.' The man smiled swiftly. 'It is settled. The boy is in your charge. You will train him to fight. He must learn how to use other weapons beside the sword. He must be able to use the dagger, throwing knife, staves and his bare hands.' The

man looked at Marcus again. There was no hint of good humour in those cold eyes as he continued. 'One day young Marcus may become a fine gladiator in the arena. Until then, I want you to continue the training he began at Porcino's school. But you must also teach him the ways of the street if he is to be an effective bodyguard for my niece.'

'Yes, master,' Festus nodded.

'Then you may leave us. Take the boy's sword with you. Then find my steward and tell him I want my finest toga cleaned and scented for tomorrow. The mob will expect nothing less from one of their consuls,' he mused. 'I want to look good when I stand beside that fat fool, Bibulus.'

'Yes, master.' Festus bowed again, then hurried across the yard back into the house. When he had gone the man turned his full attention on Marcus.

'You know that I have many enemies here in Rome, young Marcus. Enemies who would harm my family as gladly as they would dare to harm me, Gaius Julius Caesar. That is why I need someone I can trust to protect Portia.'

'I will do my best, master.'

'I want more than your best, boy,' Caesar said firmly. 'You must live to protect Portia. Every waking moment your eyes and ears must be open to every detail of your surroundings,

if you are to detect threats before they can cause harm. And not just your eyes and ears. You must use your brain. I know you have quick wits. You proved that back in Capua.'

Caesar paused for a moment and they both recalled the fight when Marcus had beaten Ferax, a boy almost twice his size, before killing two wolves that were set upon him after Marcus had refused to finish him off. But it was neither of those deeds that had won over Caesar. It was when his niece Portia had fallen into the arena, at the mercy of the ravenous wolves, and Marcus had saved her life. For that, Caesar was indebted to Marcus. At the same time, Caesar shrewdly recognized a chance to invest in a boy who might one day be a gladiator who was popular with the mob, and some of that popularity would rub off on the gladiator's owner. So Marcus had been bought from the gladiator school, transferred from one master to another like a common beast.

He leaned forward and tapped Marcus lightly on the chest. 'I may be consul, one of the two most powerful men in Rome, but even I can bleed just as easily as the next man. I have men who protect me, and men who spy for me, yet somehow I sense that you may prove to be one of my most useful servants. For now, you will guard Portia, but I may have other uses for you.'

Caesar's eyes narrowed as he stared at Marcus. The silence made Marcus edgy and he swallowed nervously. He was not yet sure what to make of his new master. At times Caesar could be generous and charming. On other occasions he appeared ruthless, hard and even cruel. 'Other uses, master?'

There was a flicker of a smile on Caesar's lips as he responded. 'Where men might be suspected a young boy may well be overlooked. That is when I will need you to be my eyes and ears.' He paused and stroked his chin.

Marcus felt a slight thrill at the implied praise and the confidence that Caesar had in him. Yet this pleasure passed swiftly as he reminded himself of the true meaning of Caesar's words. Marcus was being used as a minor playing piece in the battle between Caesar and his political enemies. But this was no game, Marcus realized. He recalled what Titus, the man he had once thought his father, had told him about the world of politics in Rome. The stakes were high – literally a matter of life and death – and now Marcus would be at the heart of it. It would be dangerous. But if Marcus could make himself valuable and served Caesar well, he could expect to be rewarded. That much he had discovered about the man; he was generous to those who helped him achieve his ambitions. Marcus's pulse quickened as he stared Caesar directly in the eye and nodded. 'I am ready.'

Caesar smiled briefly and then looked at Marcus for what felt like a long time before he spoke again. 'You know, there is something of a mystery about you, my boy. You are no common slave. Anyone can see that. You have courage, determination and toughness beyond your years. Your father would be proud of you, wherever he is.'

Marcus thought quickly. Here was his first chance to put the injustice of his situation to Caesar. 'My father is dead,' he said. 'He was murdered, on the orders of a tax collector named Decimus.'

'Oh?' Caesar pursed his lips briefly and then shrugged. 'That's too bad. But the gods have their reasons for the way things turn out.'

Marcus's heart sank at his master's curt dismissal of his miseries.

'And what of your mother?' asked Caesar.

'A slave, master. Though I don't know where she is.' As much as Marcus wanted help to track down his mother, for now he decided it was best to lie. It would be safer if his mother remained hidden from Caesar. If ever his true identity was discovered, then Marcus would be put to death, and so too would anyone who claimed the same blood as him. This man Caesar, for all the gratitude he showed Marcus for saving

his niece's life, would kill him on the spot the instant he discovered that Marcus's real father was Spartacus, the gladiator general who had commanded the rebel slave army that defied Caesar and his high-born friends. The gladiator who had almost brought about the destruction of Rome and all that it stood for.