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Opening extract from

Hero

Written by

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1.

I CAN FIT A WHOLE ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE IN MY imagination, and still have loads of room. It's big in there. Much bigger than you think. I can build a dream, a brilliant dream of anything, and be any hero I want…

For most awesome heroic imagined gladiator battles ever, once again the school is proud to present the daydreaming trophy to… Leo Biggs!

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That's also imaginary. You have to pass your trumpet exam to get a certificate (like my big sister Kirsty), or be able to read really fast and remember tons of facts to get an A at school (like my best mate George), before anyone tells you that they're proud of you. Your family don't even get you a new bike for your birthday for being a daydreamer, even if you really wanted one.

Daydreaming is the only thing I'm good at and, right here in Clarendon Road, I am a gladiator. The best kind of hero there is.

"Don't you need your helmet?" George called.

"Oh yeah, I forgot," I said, cycling back on my old bike to collect it. "Now stand back so you're in the audience. Stamp your feet a bit and do the thumbs up thing at the end when I win."

George sat on Mrs Pardoe's wall, kicking

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against the bricks, reading his book on space.

"It says in here that meteors don't normally hit the earth," George said, "they break up in the atmosphere. So there aren't going to be any explosions or anything when it comes. Shame."

"Concentrate, George. You have to pretend you're in the amphitheatre. They didn't have books in Roman times… did they?"

"Uh, I don't think so. They might have had meteors though. People think you can wish on meteors, but it's not scientific or anything."

He didn't close the book and I could tell he was still concentrating on finding out more about the meteor that was on the news. So I put on my gladiator helmet (made out of cardboard, by me) and bowed to my imaginary audience. They rumbled and cheered.

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"Jupiter's coming now. Salute, George, salute!"

The king of all the Roman gods with arms of steel and chest like hills, rolled into the night stars over Clarendon Road like a tsunami. Jupiter was huge and impressive. He sat at the back of the amphitheatre on his own kind of platform and throne, draped his arm over the statue of his lion and nodded. It was me he'd come to watch.

I held up my imaginary sword.

"George!"

George punched the sky without looking up from his book. He couldn't see or hear what I could: the whole crowd cheering my name from the thick black dark above.

Let the games begin! Jupiter boomed.

The gate opened.

"Here he comes, George!"

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"Get him, Leo, get him good."

The gladiator of Rome came charging up the slope. I twisted and turned on my bike, bumped down off the curb and picked up speed. The crowd were on their feet already and I raised my sword…

And then George's mum came round the corner.

"George! You're to come in now for your tea," she said.

I took off my helmet and put it inside my coat.

"In a minute!" George said. "I'm busy."

"It's freezing out here," she said.

I skidded over on my bike. I whispered, "George! Please stay! It *is* my birthday. You have to be here, I have to win something today."

"I'm fine," he called to his mum. "I've got a hat."

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"Yes, but you're not wearing it." She came over, pressed her hand to George's forehead. "You've got homework and you're definitely running a temperature."

"Gladiators don't have homework," I said. George grinned.

"But George does," his mum said.

"Mum!" His shoulders sagged.

She shook her head. "I think you both ought to be inside. Come on, George, home now."

"Sorry, gotta go," he sighed. He slipped off the wall, pulled at the damp from the frosty wall on the back of his trousers. "I'll come and watch tomorrow."

"Do your coat up," George's mum said as they walked away.

George turned back. "Did you know that

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Jupiter is just about the closest it ever gets to earth right now?"

I looked up. Jupiter *was* here, in the night sky over Clarendon Road.

"Yeah, I know, George."

"I'll do some research for our Roman presentation."

"Yeah, good one, see you tomorrow."

"Leo!"

"What?"

He saluted.

I didn't want to go home yet though. I really wanted something to go right today.

I bumped the curb on my bike, cruised back into the arena.

The gladiator of Rome was lurking in the shadows between the parked cars. I could smell his sweaty

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fighting smell, heard his raspy breath. Just in time I hoisted my sword over my head as he attacked. Steel clashed. I held his weight, heaved, turned, advanced, swung. We smashed our swords together again. I felt his strength and mine.

The crowd were up: thousands of creatures and men stamped their feet in the amphitheatre of the sky. Their voices roared. Swords locked, I ducked, twisted, to spin his weapon from his hands. I didn't see the fallen metal dustbin on the pavement. I braked but my front wheel thumped into the side of it. I catapulted over the bin and landed on the pavement.

The crowd groaned. Jupiter held out his arm, his fist clenched. He punched his thumb to the ground.

I'd never thought that I could lose in my own

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imagination. Maybe I wasn't even that good at imagining. I lay there, closed my eyes, sighed. It warmed the inside of my cardboard helmet but nothing else. Everything was going wrong today.

I opened my eyes but it wasn't the gladiator of Rome looking down at me. It was a little white dog.

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