

Freedom or Death

By T. Meadows

I am a broken man. Every hour is a waking nightmare, an endless cycle of slaughter, an infinite loop of carnage. At night I get no rest from my gruesome existence, the shadows of my victims dying breaths chilling my bones, their screams ringing in my ears, their ghosts haunting my dreams. Who am I? I have no name. Names are for those with worth, those with purpose, for men. I am no man. I am a gladiator. I was not born to this profession, but indentured by slavery. I was sold away by my progenitors. I hesitate to call them my parents for I never knew them, nor would I recognize their faces, and for them I have little love. I was whisked away in a blur of chains and cages. I felt only confusion and then pain as a brand was pressed against the flesh on my upper arm. I let out a cry like a wounded animal before sweet darkness embraced my consciousness. When I awoke I was in a different set of chains. I was put to work in the fields, a time I now look back upon fondly. The sun beat down hard searing my skin to angry red and the chains chafed my wrists to bleeding but it was nothing compared to what I feel now. I grew strong, for only the strong survived. The weak fell and the weak were punished. Years after my arrival, a merchant visited my master. With him he brought his daughter. She was elegant and light skinned with graceful poise. I was to serve the table, for the mistress had killed one of the house slaves in a fit of anger for stealing bread from the kitchen. As I was pouring the wine I overheard bits and pieces of conversation. The merchant was from Rome. I stood with the pitcher by the wall ears perked, as simple as the furniture in the eyes of the guests. The merchant spoke of soaring marble structures, of the great horse races, and the blood sport of the colosseum. I stood in awe, my jaw dropping despite myself, forgetting my place. I wanted to hear more of this seemingly magical place, but all too soon the topic was swapped to business and my interest shifted. I got a better look at the merchant's daughter and was instantly smitten. As I was staring she turned and met my eyes with a small smile like honey. I instantly looked away. It was not proper for a slave to meet a free man's eyes. As the meal was ending the merchant and my master stood and shook hands. "As always it is a pleasure doing business with you Boracrusus," the merchant baritone, rubbing his stomach appreciatively. "Indeed it is.. Indeed it is" my master said as he looked over the coins he'd received from the merchant as a raven looks over its shiny treasures. As he was preparing leaving, the merchant's daughter tugged at her father's sleeve, pointing at me as I assisted in clearing the table, whispering something in his ear. He nodded slowly and handed my master an extra caesar emblazoned coin. My master yelled across the room at me "Slave, pack your things you will be leaving with Phineas in the morning" I nodded numbly, inwardly deeply surprised. For what purpose could the elegant girl before me wish for her father to buy me? I rolled this question through my mind constantly as I packed my meager belongings into a small bag. It took me quite a while to fall asleep, staring at the ceiling and pondering my fate to be. I slept fitfully and dreamlessly, waking up at the crack of dawn to drag myself into the slave cart of the merchant--my new master's--caravan. Before I crawled into the crowded cart I saw the merchant's daughter boarding a carriage at the head of the caravan. I could've sworn she met my eyes. The journey didn't feel as long as it should've. The cart was cramped and chances to relieve oneself were few and far between. Days and nights passed and I didn't see the merchant's daughter. Finally,

we arrived in Rome. It even more impressive than the merchant had claimed, though I don't believe any simple words could describe its glory so I leave it's true majesty to the reader's imagination, for who has not already heard of the wonders of Rome? We were briskly taken to the merchants house. Some of the other slaves in the cart were taken away to the auction courtyards before we arrived. I held little envy for them. A slave manager brusquely showed us to our quarters and left. Our duties would be assigned later in the day. We were to wait in our quarters until then. There was little conversation as we awaited the delivery of our fates. The suspense was thick enough to feel in the air, each individual hoping for a desirable assignment. I was expecting a long wait, but when the steward arrived, I was the first to be called with a silent wave of his hand, a motion I assumed meant to follow him. He led me through an impressive labyrinth of gazebos and gardens without saying a word. I glanced around nervously. I hadn't the slightest clue what I would be assigned to. The silent steward led me to a building with an appearance similar to that of a barracks. The steward left me there, presumably to lead another of the newly arrived slaves to their position. I glanced around, for a moment thinking I was alone. The idea of escape flitted through my mind, only to be crushed by the sight of a passing guard on patrol. I ducked into the building. Inside there were a number of men sitting at tables eating a hearty meal. One motioned me to sit with them, grinning through an overfull mouth. "Welcome brother, let us eat and drink well before we die tonight!" I ate in near silence. I was not used to talking, especially not in the raucous manner of the scarred men around me. Talking during work would only earn a slave a whipping. Through the questions I was able to interject in the conversation I gleaned that I was to work as a gladiator to entertain at the parties often held at the manor. The men also explained that it was unlikely that I would die, at least in the immediate future. Death was reserved for only the largest and most raucous parties. I went to sleep early, exhausted by the excitement of the day. I awoke to another large meal and a brief combat training session. I had never held a sword before and most the session was spent on the basics, such as grip and stance. Training was followed by a noon meal and then sparring. I was paired up with a tall bronzed man covered in rippling toned muscles. We were both outfitted with a cloth padded leather shield and a wooden sword. I stepped in the arena and before I knew it I was on the ground with a painful red welt across my chest. The man had taken a quick step forwards and slammed my shield out of the way, knocking me off balance, following the shield bash with a deft swing of the wooden blade across my chest. He glowered at me as I got up. He rushed me again, eyes dull as if he was utterly bored. This time I had time to sidestep the shield but barely raised my own in time to parry his blade with which he still managed to clip my shoulder. The man took a few steps back and began to circle. I knew he wouldn't attempt the same trick a third time. I decided to take the offensive, running forwards and making a sloppy feint at his right. It caught him off guard and he went to block, rendering him incapable of reacting when I went into a slide and caught him hard across the shins with my wooden blade. I scrambled to my feet and kicked in the back of his knees. His legs crumpled beneath him and I tapped the back of his head with my sword. I hadn't noticed but all the other gladiators had gone silent. Even those sparring had paused to stare at our match. The large man in front of me rose to his feet. "No one has bested me in combat to this date. You have my respect." Combat training resumed but I was too shaken to participate wholeheartedly. The next day was my first experience at a party. I was outfitted in a pauldron, bracers, arm guards and a

leather kilt. Both I and my opponent were given real metal weapons. I was confused, wondering how we were to avoid killing each other with real blades. I walked out for my fight, squinting in the bright torchlight as the sand slid against my bare feet. As I surveyed my surroundings I realized the answer to my question. There was one man in front of me standing, panting heavily, and another on the ground bleeding from a gaping hole in his chest. This was not to be a fake bout of fights, this was to be a true bloodsport. I broke out in a cold sweat as I suddenly realized that I might not leave this arena alive. The announcer yelled something out to where the partygoers were seated. I could barely hear anything over their screams for blood. I saw the merchant's daughter in the crowd. Was it just my imagination or did she give a small smile when our eyes met? I had little time to decide. Two words pierced the air. "Gladiators! Fight!" I gripped the leather bound handle of my gladius tightly. My knuckles were white as if the bones were pressing through to the surface. The gladiator sentenced to this bout to the death with me held a deadly cold gaze. In his hands were a trident and net. I had a foggy memory of mention of such fighters from earlier in the day. Retarius they were called, and they were considered some of the deadliest fighters. I didn't want to wait for him to come to me, he could all too easily wear me down with the superior reach of his trident and the threat of his net. I lunged forwards desperately hoping to catch him off guard. All too late I realized my error. The man casually threw his weighted net forwards, knocking me off balance and sending me tumbling to the ground beneath the weight. Nary a second after I felt the crunch of sand beneath me, the sensation of the trident piercing the flesh of my side shredded my consciousness with pain. I could barely keep from passing out as he ripped the trident from my ribs, destroying flesh with the barbed tip. Through slitted eyes I saw him raise his trident, turning to the audience, awaiting the audiences raucous request for my brutally dramatized death. One by one they each took up the cheer "Kill him" "Kill him" they said. I twisted slightly, wincing in pain as the net rubbed against my decimated side. I wanted at least one last glimpse of the merchant's daughter before I made the journey to Pluto's palace. I was able to just see her out of the corner of my eye and my soul shattered. On her face was a nearly gleeful expression, a lust for blood, my blood, to spill across the ground of the arena. For a moment my mind went entirely blank. Despite the horrible pain which I was no longer aware of, I stood up, managing to move even with the net weighing heavily upon me. I reared back my arm and thrust my gladius through the other man's turned back. I ripped off the net and stood panting heavily, the crowd silenced by shock. Red mist clouded my vision and suddenly the blood of the man before me was not enough. I remember but a feeling of an incessant itching need. From what I have gathered I managed to escape the gladiatorial pit and attempted to assault the audience. Evidently I was suppressed by guards before I could do so, but I remember sending quite a few to Pluto's domain. When I awoke I was in a dark cramped cell smelling of human excrement and ancient dried blood. I waited there for hours. Perhaps I was dead and this was my eternal punishment for the murders I had committed. After what seemed like an eternity I heard the door's lock click. It slid open to let in a marginal amount of light, though it was enough to burn my eyes after the time of intense darkness. "Alright ya crazy *landica* come on out, it's time for you to die so you're off my hands." Strangely enough I complied without hesitation. I no longer cared what happened to me. I didn't care about the shackles on my wrist, I didn't care about the sword being thrust into my hand, and I didn't care about the huge cheering audience before me as I stumbled out into the arena. I

noticed that my hands were unbound and slowly came to the realization that I was in a new arena, one much larger than the one before. Then it suddenly struck me that I was in no average brawling pit. I was in the colosseum, the birthing place of legends, and more importantly, the only place where I could earn my freedom. Another gladiator was approaching me and I barely had time to react, parrying his sword off to the side. He followed up with a thrust to my chest which I sidestepped, following up the graceful footwork with a powerful stab to his abdomen, turning the once man before me into a lifeless sack of blood leaking organs upon my blade. I quickly withdrew my sword and turned to the audience. They were cheering. For me. Spiked on adrenaline and driven by a mad greed for glory, I became one with the arena. Days and matches blurred together, a stampede of sensations and glorious murder, a delight to the audience and a secret delight to myself. Slash, jab, parry, stab, each stroke of my sword was death and I was a god. In those moments I was judge jury and executioner. But never once did I lose track of my goal. 50 score wins. This is what I needed for my freedom. I fought in that bloody arena for years, not once did I consider the prospect of losing. I had to win for myself, and so that I could see the merchant's daughter again. I had convinced myself that I had only imagined her chanting for my death, that I had been delusional with pain. After almost 3 years and 49 score and 19 battles came my final opponent. I emerged from the Hypogeum, both hands held high, a gladius held in both hands, a shiny breastplate upon my chest, the mark of a veteran gladiator. "Ave imperato morituir te salutant!" I bellowed to the crowd in the traditional salute. I glanced across the arena and suddenly my facade of invincible pride shattered into a thousand pieces. It was the bronzed man from the merchants house. For a moment I was confused how he got there, but I regained my composure quickly. It would be a fight just like the others. If I had beaten him once, I could beat him again. We approached each other and stopped 2 feet apart. I could almost feel his warm breath. "My name is Accius, you stabbed my brother in the back when he was defenseless. For this, you must die." With that our epic clash of blades began. Each tested the other carefully with experimental jabs and feints, feeling out each others defenses with care, knowing that a single minute mistake could easily mean the end. Finally he made a move, the same shield thrust he'd caught me with years ago, or at least that's what I thought. He stopped the thrust just short of the point where he would've been forced to commit and lose his balance. As I went to make my sidestep he made a low feint which I moved to parry, only to be surprised when he transitioned it into a pommel strike, catching me just below the temple. I was sent reeling and in that moment expected my death. He went for the opportunity, lashing out with his blade greedily, but I refused to die. The blade was aimed at my head but I managed to jump so that it was intercepted by my breastplate. In that single moment I managed to execute a poetic end to my opponent, bashing his shield out of the way with the pommel of one of my blades and delivering a killing blow the heart with the other. For a moment I was elated but then looking down I realized he had managed to slide his sword between the front and back pieces of my breastplate, piercing deep into my side where my old wounds from the trident resided. Victorious I fell to the ground. After I awoke I promptly bought my freedom and payed a skilled physician to heal my wounds. He attempted every cure he knew but in the end he only succeeded in delaying the inevitable. So as of now I am a dead man standing. Within a week my body shall cease to function. Thus here I sit, an illiterate slave dictating his life

to a scribe who he hired with his last denari. And now for my final action I think I shall take a nap, yes that sounds pleasant, the sweet embrace of the realm of sleep....