

1

The Roar of the Mob

"Saturus! Saturus!" The call slowly penetrated the unconscious corridors of my sleeping mind. Through the fog of my awakening it became louder and clearer, recognisable as the voice of Rufus, calling up to me from the street. Suddenly reality flooded my mind and in a rush of excitement I leapt off my bed. In the darkness I began a ridiculous dance about the floor of my room which was the result of my attempts to get my feet into my sandals while simultaneously wrapping my cloak about my body. After some moments of silence from the street, the cries were renewed.

"Saturus, wake up you good for nothing bedbug - we'll miss everything if you don't come quickly!"

"Yes, coming!" I yelled in the direction of the shuttered window through which the cries were to be heard.

"Thank the gods! I thought after last night you were going to chicken out, you lily-livered milksop!"

"Why don't you go and stick your head in the cess trench and wait there till I'm ready?"

We were the best of friends, Rufus and I. We shared everything together, including, as of three days before, our proud membership of the Youth Guild of the town of Thurburbo Minus. And it was in support of our new-found comrades in the Guild that we were headed that morning to the amphitheatre games. The games! For how long had I longed to go and see the games? But, alas, my father had what he called a 'modern' outlook, and never attended the games himself, nor had he ever allowed me to attend. Until today. Despite his misgivings, he had given in to my pleas to let me join the Guild, and now how could he stop me going to support my companions, who were putting on a performance of their own that morning?

"That's it! If you're not out here in one minute I'm going without you!" came the voice from the street.

"Don't you dare! I told you, I'm coming."

The dance was over, and I was dressed and clattering down the wooden stairs. I glanced around at the dim shadows of the deserted pottery workshop on the ground floor of our house. This room was normally a hive of industry with a score of slaves busily mixing clay, turning it on wheels, decorating and dipping it, and stoking the fires beneath the kilns which turned it into the finished product. However, today was a public holiday, and most of the slaves would be at the games as well. Out in the street I was dazzled by the morning sunshine, and there was no sign of Rufus anywhere. A few other passers-by were mostly headed in the direction of the amphitheatre.

I silently cursed Rufus for his impatience, for, excited as I was about attending the games, I had no desire to go there alone. Then, just as I was setting off down the street, there was a shriek from around a corner and Rufus bounded out at me, brandishing one of the urinal jars from outside the fuller's workshop.

"Here," he cried, "I've brought you something from the cess trench!"

I ducked as he upturned it over my head. Of course, it was empty.

"Why don't you grow up?" I said. "I remember you doing that when we were still at primary school."

"Still gets you every time!" he laughed. "Hey, guess what? I saw old Flavius heading for the games - better make sure we stay well clear of him."

Flavius was our grammarian, who had been attempting for the last two years to teach us the Greek and Latin classics. This was no easy task for him, but he was a man of immense fortitude who seemed to thrive on such a challenge, and he laboured at it day after day in the hope that one day he might see some fruit.

"I still can't get over that gladiator - where was he from again?"

"The Crow, you mean? He's from Utica. Been at it for five years now I heard someone say, and he's still alive to tell the tale. Must've killed hundreds of opponents."

We had gone along with other members of the Guild the night before to the *cena libera* or free banquet, a lavish meal laid on for all the combatants who were going to take part the following day. Anyone who wanted could go and watch this event, and we had found it well worth a visit. With morbid curiosity we had walked among the tables, wondering which of those bodies filling themselves so nonchalantly now with meat and wine would be bloody corpses before the following evening. The largest group of onlookers had been crowded around the man nicknamed the Crow, who had risen to fame in Africa as a formidable Samnite gladiator. He always appeared in the arena dressed entirely in black, including his shield and visored helmet, hence his nickname. He had been sitting in his familiar black attire, making lewd remarks to the young women who draped themselves around him, and boasting now and then to no-one in particular.

"Six times they awarded me the wooden sword. Six times I came back to fight again. The Crow will always be back - have no fear!" And he laughed out loud at this, for he could see plenty of fear in the faces of some of the less experienced gladiators sitting nearby, who were clearly praying to the Fates not to pair them with the Crow the following day.

"Is he never going to retire?" I said to Rufus. "He must have a death-wish or something."

"Probably can't do anything else but fight, drink and bed women." Rufus' explanation seemed more likely.

We would have to wait till the afternoon, however, to see the Crow in action. As was the usual custom, the morning would be devoted to combats involving animals, while the afternoon was reserved for the even more popular contests between gladiators. In the morning most of the blood spilled was animals' blood. In the afternoon it was one hundred per cent human.

"And that runaway slave!" Rufus was referring to a condemned prisoner who had also been eating at the banquet alongside the gladiators, and who was due to be executed during the midday interval. "What a cretin he looked. Imagine trying to escape and then getting caught."

"It'll be his guts that'll do the escaping today," I remarked, and we both cackled at my wondrous wit.

As we approached the amphitheatre, the noise of the crowd, and the accompanying music, grew gradually louder. Our amphitheatre in Thuburbo Minus is not like those grand edifices that you see in cities like Carthage or Thysdrus. It is actually a natural bowl in the hill on which the town is built, with the arena at the bottom and the seats built up on terraces around the sides. It is thus an unimposing structure when viewed from the street, since all that can be seen is a ten foot high wall, topped by the masts for the awning, but the noise which was coming from the other side of the wall betrayed the fact that today there were several thousand people in there. Having never been through the gates in this wall before, I was taken aback by the sight that met my eyes when we went in. We entered at the top of the highest terrace and had an immediate view of the whole bowl, across the crowded terraces and down into the arena. I stopped and stared, rooted to the spot in amazement, until Rufus jerked me forward.

"Get a move on, you sloucher! What are you standing there for?" I was suddenly aware that I was partially blocking the entrance way, and that people were beginning to shout and push past me in annoyance.

"Look," said Rufus, "down there's the area that's been reserved for the Guild. You won't usually get to sit that near the arena, but they've given us good seats today. Aren't we the lucky ones?"

In the centre of the sandy arena was a lion tamer with a large whip, making a troupe of three lions do tricks like climbing onto stools and jumping through hoops. As we threaded our way slowly down through the crowds, my gaze wandered from the performance in the arena to the terraces all around, which by now were about three quarters filled. As we came lower we were rubbing shoulders with higher and higher ranks of society. At the top, near the entrances, stood the slaves and other non-citizens, then there was a tier especially for women, and lower down the

various classes of citizens of the town. On the podium just above the arena sat the town's dignitaries and visiting officials, as well as a small band of musicians who intermittently struck up a tune on horns, trumpets, flutes and a water organ. We were positioned just above the podium, not far from the band, with a superb view of all that was happening.

Around us were thirty or forty other members of the Youth Guild, those who had not been selected to take part in the performance. The performance was a mock hunt, in which the participants would pit themselves against ever more difficult and dangerous beasts. As a finale the most skilled huntsman of the Guild, a fellow by the name of Archaeus, was going to face a leopard single-handed.

Despite the fact that Rufus had claimed that we were in danger of missing the whole show due to our late arrival, we were actually in plenty of time. Various performances, often with musical accompaniment, were following one another in the arena now, but these were just openers. Almost anyone, it seemed, who could juggle a few balls or do a few somersaults, was allowed to step into the arena and display his skills, or lack thereof in many cases.

After about half an hour the arena was suddenly empty, the band played a rousing fanfare, and the crowd became noticeably quieter as people who had been paying scant attention to the proceedings now looked to see what was happening. Our performance was first on the bill, and the Guild members around us grew especially quiet and tense, waiting to see our comrades appear. Then from the main opening into the arena four figures emerged. I recognised all of them as having been at the banquet the night before. As they appeared a great cheer erupted from the crowd, and the Guild members around us went wild, shouting and whistling and waving their arms in the air. Rufus and I joined in, swept away by the elation around us.

The four huntsmen were armed with hunting spears and daggers, and they strode proudly to the centre of the arena where they took up position. Immediately, from four gates in the arena wall, four bulls were released, and began to trot back and forth in the sandy space, pawing the ground with their hooves, evidently suspicious of the group at the centre. The crowd, hungry for blood, roared all around them. Thus the first battle of the day began. It did not take a genius to see that the bulls had drawn the short straw. There was little chance of them coming out of the affair alive, but the question was, would they manage to shed any of the huntsmen's blood before they succumbed to their weapons?

The first bull was dispatched by a carefully aimed spear which went straight into its neck and brought it down, to a tumultuous roar from the terraces - blood was flowing at last! The beast was finished off with the spear-thrower's dagger, and the four huntsmen remained unscathed. However, before the other three had claimed their victims, one had been knocked over, though apparently unhurt, and another had been caught in the thigh by one of the bull's horns. This development sent the crowd to a new pitch of excitement. We cheered madly as he picked himself up and staggered away from the bull, with blood flowing freely from the wound in his leg, while his companions threatened the animal with their spears. In the end, wounded as he was, the injured huntsman still managed to claim his bull, and all four left the arena, to redoubled cheers and whistles from the crowd.

Someone sitting next to Rufus was shouting something in his ear, but I couldn't hear what it was. I leant over and shouted amid the din.

"What's he saying?"

"That's Marcus Sunnius who got it in the leg - his first time in the arena, apparently."

"Will he be all right?"

"Should be. It didn't look too bad - a lot of blood, but that's what everyone comes to see isn't it?"

And a lot of blood was certainly spilled before our eyes during the remainder of the performance. After the bulls' blood we were treated to buffalo's blood, bear's blood, lion's blood, and finally Archaeus, the hero of the Youth Guild, was out there alone in the arena, face to face with the leopard. In the combats leading up to this finale the participants had been armed with various weapons, most of the killing being done with spear and bow, but several huntsmen had also

wielded burning firebrands. Archaeus was carrying a spear as he walked out into the arena, but the first thing he did was to throw it away, and draw a short dagger, provoking an awed response from the crowd - a collective gasp of amazement arising from the terraces, as he flourished the dagger in the air, turning around to take in the whole crowd at once.

Now the leopard was out too, circling around him. I felt a sudden chill, wondering if it would really be possible for him to kill the creature with only a short dagger. I was shouting, with all those around me, "Archaeus! Archaeus!" as he advanced towards the leopard, dagger at the ready. Exactly what happened next I was never very sure about when I tried later to picture the incident once more in my mind. All I can recall is the magnificent creature suddenly bounding at Archaeus, and a glint of metal as the dagger rose then flew into the air to fall several yards away on the sand. There was a roar from the crowd as the hunter fell heavily and then a scream, audible even above the din of the spectators as the leopard tugged at something violently and blood flowed out from where its jaws were. Almost immediately the beast fell on its side, and I could not understand what had happened until I noticed an arrow protruding from its flank. Then several attendants ran out from a gateway and quickly crossed to the prone forms of Archaeus and the leopard.

Excited voices could be heard all around us.

"What happened?"

"What was the fool playing at, trying to fight with only a dagger?"

"Is he still alive?"

The answer to this last question soon became evident, as the attendants finished their inspection then gestured to some other attendants who came out in their turn, carrying a stretcher, lifted the body of Archaeus onto it, and began to carry it towards one of the arena's two main gateways.

"The *Porta Libitinensis*," said Rufus, "That means he's dead."

I stared in shock at the body of the leopard and the red stain in the sand beside it. I had just witnessed a man being killed before my very eyes. Most of the crowd seemed to take it in their stride, although several of the Guild members were leaving the terraces, with looks of dismay on their faces. I guessed that they were personal friends of Archaeus. I wondered if I was going to be sick, but then I told myself to act like a man. What would Rufus and the other Guild members around me think if they knew how shaken I had been at the sight of violent death? It happened all the time in the amphitheatre, and the crowd seemed to love it.

And indeed, by the time we climbed the steps that afternoon to make our way out to the street at the end of the games, I was surprised when I recalled how that first death had affected me. I had seen a lot more during the course of the day, and each time I had grown more accustomed to the sight, until in the end I was as eager as anyone in the crowd for more. First there had been the condemned slave, torn to pieces by a bear during the midday interval, a rather gruesome sight as his arm had ended up detached from his body while he was still alive. This I found particularly nauseating, mainly because Rufus and I were eating lunch at the time - some bread and cheese which Rufus had bought from a vendor. At least, he said he had bought it, although many of Rufus' 'purchases' did not actually involve money changing hands. Then most of the gladiatorial contests had ended with the death of one of the participants. The Crow had, of course, done away with one more opponent, to the delight of the crowd, and had strutted arrogantly out of the *Porta Sanavivaria*, the Gate of Life, as he had done so many times before.

"You're a weed, Saturus," said Rufus as we made our way along the crowded street, heading back towards the forum. "I thought we were going to see your lunch spewed all over the terrace."

"It was the cheese," I replied. "It tasted rancid."

"You're a hopeless liar," he laughed. "Still, I suppose it was your first time. Even I got a shock when Archaeus got himself chomped. That was pretty horrible."

"He died quicker than most," I said. "That wretch of a slave, for example."

"But that was different. I mean, Archaeus wasn't meant to die. You know what I mean? The prisoners and the gladiators - they know what they're in for. But Archaeus - he was just showing off..."

I pondered this opinion for some moments as we walked along, wondering if it was possible to distinguish between different kinds of death in this way. Then Rufus suddenly stopped in the street, staring ahead of him in horror.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Weren't we supposed to have learned that passage of Virgil for tomorrow?"

"Come now," I began, "and I shall tell you of the glory that lies in store for the sons of Dardanus, for the men of..."

"Oh, you make me sick, you really do!"

"Me?" I said innocently. "Are you sure it's not that rancid cheese we had for lunch?"

We were at the forum by this time, standing amid the huge temples and other public buildings that formed a focus for the life of Thuburbo Minus. There was still about half an hour before the time of the evening meal, and Rufus stopped me beside the steps of the temple of Saturn.

"You've really learned the passage?" he asked me.

"I think so - more or less."

"Right. You'd better teach it to me." He sat down on the steps, and I leapt onto the pedestal at the side and began, putting on an exaggerated impression of our grammarian Flavius during a lesson.

"Gnaeus Speratus, repeat after me: 'Come now, and I shall tell you...'"

Half an hour later he had, like me, learned it - more or less. And by that time, I knew it perfectly.