

Tradition & Honor

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Gladiatorial combat took the Romans by storm from 105 BCE to 404 CE. The strong survived, and the weak perished, or worse, were dishonored for their weakness). Gladiators instantly became a staple in Roman culture as a way to purify the ranks, improve the army, and entertain the rich. The most powerful and successful of these Gladiators was a man named Maximus—the last of the Gladiators.

A father bonds with his sons in a peaceful wooden cabin on the outskirts of Rome.

“Come, have a seat with me by the fire.”

Maximus calls his twin sons to rest with him by their fireplace. The peace of the cabin is enough to put anyone to sleep. The soft sound of the crackling fire occupied a father preparing to open up to his seven-year-old twin sons, Marcus and Atlas. He had once wished their mother to have this talk had she not passed away at childbirth.

In a profound but soft voice (one that you may imagine a God to possess), Maximus opens up to his sons,

“My sons, you’re both almost of age. Which means you will soon have to test your strength in the arena.

The combat of the arena is the most honorable tradition of our people, dating back years to your grandfather. We do what we do for our family and our people. Without us, our army will fall.”

Maximus kneels from his chair and rests one hand on his son’s shoulders. He smiles through his beard with nothing but gentle love.

“Father, I’m scared to fight. What if I lose? Will I lose my honor? Will you be disappointed?”

With his newly found courage in the silence and warmth of the fire and his father's presence, Atlas expresses his worry to his father.

Maximus moves his hand from Marcus and rests both hands on Atlas' shoulders.

“Atlas, you will never disappoint me. I have trained you since you were a small boy and will keep training you until your first battle. You will be a Gladiator, and you will be ready, and I will always be proud of you.”

Atlas couldn't help but smile and embrace his father. Joined by Marcus, with nothing but the sound of the crackling fire and the smell of burnt wood, the three shared one of a few heartwarming moments.

Ten Years Later

Bystanders couldn't help but blink at the crack of every wooden strike. The sound mimics that of the crack of a whip. Atlas and Marcus lock wooden blades. With over a decade of training under each of their belts, Atlas and Marcus intensely spar with each other as bystanders watch in awe. The intensity of the heat rising from the sand numbed the pain of the blisters on each of their feet. The beads of sweat trickled down their faces and covered each developed muscular frame. Each movement is so strong and aggressive yet so precise. Trading strikes and blocks, each fighter desperately searching for a hole in their adversary's defense.

“GET HIM OFF BALANCE! DON'T SEARCH FOR A WEAKNESS, CREATE ONE”

Maximus watches eagerly as his sons battle. A culmination of years of training, blood, sweat, and tears has led to this moment. The winner of this sparring match will earn the right to battle first and face a real adversary in the arena.

Atlas deflects a violent right jab attempt from Marcus and attempts to counter with a swift spin and strike. As Atlas spins, he plants his foot into the sand, torquing his body and chambering a devastating slash aimed right for Marcus' rib cage. But before Atlas could fire such a strike, Marcus took the opportunity and kicked his hind leg forward, launching needle-like sand into Atlas' eyes. Atlas writhes in pain and stumbles backward. The stabbing sensation in his eyes, combined with the pain from the previous strikes on top of the heat, was almost unbearable. Marcus kicks Atlas' legs out from under him with another swift kick. Atlas hits the ground with a grunt of pain. Ending the battle of power, Marcus holds his blade next to Atlas' throat, signifying the kill.

The victor falls to his knees in exhaustion and triumph as the bystanders cheer and applaud. Maximus rises from his seat and approaches the warriors. Both of which are still recovering from their battle. Out of breath and exhausted, Atlas coughs out sand and picks the jagged pieces out of his eyes. Maximus stands over his sons, his massive frame shading them from the sweltering sun. "Congratulations, Marcus and Atlas, you fought well. But you must remember that there are no rules in combat."

Maximus smiles and holds out his hands, one for each of his sons to grab to help them to their feet. Atlas lays in the boiling sand, struggling to take the pieces out of his eyes with his bloodied and blistered fingertips. Meanwhile, Marcus comes to his feet with a sudden burst of exhilaration. With all his strength left, he looks at the crowd and roars in excitement and anticipation.

"When is my first fight, father?! Who am I going to fight?"

Maximus chuckles, "In time, my son. Go wash up and recover. You will fight one month from now."

“YES! Finally!”

Marcus’ excitement overwhelms him until he snaps back to reality and looks down at Atlas. The reality of Atlas’ defeat sets in. Marcus kneels next to Atlas.

“You fought well buddy. I mean it. It was an incredibly close fight that could have gone either way.”

Maximus kneels next to his sons. For a moment, he lifts his hand to rest on Atlas’ shoulders; however, realizing the blisters and tears that cover his body, Maximus refrains.

“Do not be disappointed, son. You fought very well.”

Atlas pulls himself to his feet in excruciating pain. The intense heat from the sun had flamed his skin, which started to blister and peel. The sand still boiled from beneath his feet, and he had a dagger-like pain in his knee from Marcus’ kick. Marcus puts Atlas’ torn arm around him to help escort Atlas back to their home.

“No”

Atlas takes his arm away.

“You earned the victory. Celebrate. Just make sure you take the time to recover and prepare for your first fight in the arena. You better make it out okay. We have a rematch to prep for.”

Atlas forms the closest expression to a smile as he can. The bruises and cuts are beginning to swell on his jaw. Marcus smiles as the two tap blades like that of a fistbump.

One Month Later

The roar of the arena booms through Rome. Countless spectators watch battle after battle as Gladiators dispatch limbs in the fights leading up to the main event. Maximus and Atlas assisted Marcus in

equipping his armor in preparation for his fight. The armory they were preparing in was positioned beneath the Colosseum. The crowd's roar was muffled but could still be heard; even the thuds and bangs of weapons and bodies shook the ceiling, causing dust to fall from the roof. Marcus sported a slightly chipped gold chest-plate with worn leather straps around the shoulders and waist. With his pristine sword and shield as his weapons of choice, he was flooded with excitement and nervousness. Marcus paced around the room in anticipation of his announcement. Atlas speaks over the muffled thuds and yells, "How are you feeling?"

"STRONG! I still have no idea who I'm fighting. Regardless, I'm ready to give the people of Rome a show to remember. I would lie if I said I wasn't a little nervous."

Maximus chimes in.

"Good. The nervousness will make you stronger. Punch harder. Move faster. Just remember, always walk in the arena like you own it. Believe that you are the strongest man ever to step foot in that stadium, and not even Zeus could strike you down."

Marcus nods. He takes a deep breath in and exhales shakily out of his mouth. He then shakes out all of his nerves and yells. He tries to flush out the nerves and prepare for the onslaught ahead.

The Sudden Bang of a Bell Signals Marcus To Enter The Arena

The bang of the bell echoed through the underground caverns and struck Marcus to the bone. Every training exercise, every sparring session, every story in the log cabin flashed before his eyes. Marcus summons every fiber of courage he has and lets out a roar in an attempt to fire himself up for the battle.

Whether or not it was successful was questionable. After Marcus equips his weapons and helmet, he steps

onto a wooden lift and tugs on the rope. The creaky wooden lift was covered in dried blood and even had teeth scattered throughout the logs. As the lift begins to ascend Marcus to the battlefield, Atlas speaks out, “Don’t forget our rematch!”

Marcus looks at Atlas and nods. He then looks to the surface as he rises into the stadium. Maximus ushers Atlas to the stairs so they can take a position in the stands.

Marcus arrives to the surface to be met by deafening cheers and screams. The anticipation behind the first fight of the son of the greatest Gladiator of their time is unmatched. The wails of not only the crowd but also the wounded, which scatter the sand of the stadium, cause Marcus to almost instinctively cover his ears. Marcus’ vision inside his helmet was limited and narrow; every sound echoed, and he couldn't help but listen as his own breaths sped up and deepened. Suddenly, Marcus hears the sound of heavy and violently fast footsteps approaching him from behind. The very second he turns to his opponent, reality strikes him like a train as a lion lunges towards Marcus.

Marcus draws his shield just in time as he and the lion clash with unimaginable force. The lion continues to push against Marcus’ shield, attempting to claw at him from around the sides. On the other hand, Marcus plants his feet and bashes the lion with his brass shield, stunning the mighty creature. Marcus advances on the lion, swiftly slicing the lion across the face and shoulder. The crowd's roar explodes as these two powerful beasts lock horns in combat yet again.

Marcus relies upon an old strategy and kicks sand into the beast’s face, giving him a short moment to back peddle, collect himself mentally, and summon a defensive stance. Marcus had his shield drawn in

front of his body with his left arm while holding his sword in his right, resting the blade on top of the shield as he peered over and stared down the mighty beast.

With this moment to think, Marcus suddenly becomes aware of every aspect of the stadium. The red-tainted sands, the thunderous boom of the audience, and the scars and blood that cover the lion in which he battles. Marcus was rattled by the lion alone, for he had believed he would fight a human. Marcus isn't sure if he feels better or worse about his sudden change of adversity.

The lion shakes off the sand and locks eyes with Marcus. These are two opponents battling with all of their might. This is the essence of the arena.

With a frightening burst of speed, the lion pounces towards Marcus in a mask of fury. Marcus backsteps to prepare for this attack. However, when he plants his foot, a violent bolt of pain strikes through his entire right leg. Marcus had accidentally stepped on a jagged, filthy dagger of a dead Gladiator.

Marcus writhed in pain, but before he could reach to remove the dagger, the lion had already slashed at his helmet, knocking it off in the process and gashing the lower right side of his face and jaw. The sheer force and power of the slash felt like a battle ax, knocking Marcus off his feet and onto his back. The lion circles back again, like a shark preparing to deliver its final attack.

“MARCUS!!”

Atlas yells from the stands. A yell that, even among the roaring thunder of the crowd, can be heard like a gunshot through a silent forest. With a lifelong bond of brotherhood flashing through his eyes, Atlas puts his leg on the rail of the stands and prepares to vault into the arena. However, he is stopped when Maximus grabs Atlas by the shoulder.

“What are you doing?! Marcus is going to get killed! I can get in there and help!”

“I can’t let you do that Atlas. Marcus knew this could happen and accepted the responsibility. Thousands of people are killed in the arena every day. Think of our culture and our people.”

Atlas stands in shock at his father's words. These words pierced Atlas like a cold, steel blade.

Without another word, Atlas abruptly pushes Maximus backward and takes the opportunity to vault the railing into the ring. Frantically searching the sand for a weapon, Atlas finds and draws a bow and arrow. By this point, the wild beast had started its charge towards Marcus, ready for an onslaught. In the chaos of the crowd, the pain from the boiling, mushy sand, and the pressure of a lifetime’s bond on his shoulders, Atlas draws the arrow, ready to fire. At that very moment, it seemed as if the crowd went silent, and there were only two beings in the world, Atlas and the lion. Atlas fires, striking the lion directly in the skull, killing it instantly.

The monster falls into the sand with a thud. The sand pushes and slides, bringing the beast's momentum to a halt. This time, the crowd goes dead silent. Thousands of people who once sounded like they could create a supernova, yet not a sound to be heard. A thud breaks the unnatural wave of silence. Maximus had dropped into the ring with a fury of rage accompanied by disappointment.

“ATLAS! What have you done?! You’ve disgraced the sanctity of the Gladiators, and you have dishonored your people and your family!”

“I’VE DISHONORED MY FAMILY? You were going to let that beast kill Marcus! I may have no honor, but you are a slave to it!”

Maximus pauses for a moment as he and Atlas lock eyes.

“You bring shame upon us all. Over a decade of training just to ruin the sanctity of our people’s way of life.

You are no longer my son.”