**A Day at the Games**

EXT. ROMAN MARKET. DAY

*(The hum of a crowd rises above the noise of commerce. Here and there, we can hear a voice elevated above the crowd, selling goods or telling someone off for pushing in. It is a bustling scene, as excitement grows for the games.* ***LUCIUS****, a Roman citizen, is waiting for his friend to arrive)*

**LUCIUS**

There you are! We’ve been waiting since dawn for you to arrive and you don’t want to be late for your first day at the Games.

Well, there it is. The arena! Magnificent, isn’t it? Ok, so it’s not as impressive as ones in Italia or Hispania, but it’s still one of the largest in Britannia. Around 8,000 people can gather here for the Games, and looking around today, I can believe it.

*(****LUCIUS*** *guides the friend through the throng of the market. The calls of traders grow louder and fainter as they pass by.)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

Some people have stayed out all night in little tents in order to get the best seats. And over there, you can get all kinds of souvenirs, such as figurines, flasks, and even pocket mirrors if you have the money. Although it’s best not to get too close to the crowd. I heard tell of one crowd in Rome that got so large, two senators were crushed to death.

Luckily, we don’t have to worry too much about that right now as we can go straight in. No, you don’t owe me anything. The games are free.

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

That big shot over there in the over-sized toga and ill-fitting wig is trying to impress someone, or desperately wants to get into politics, so he’s putting on a grand spectacle to show how generous he is to the people. He’s called the editor, and usually responsible for the content of the games. Stands to reason… he’s paying for it.

I heard tell of none other than Scipio Africanus, remember him?

*(****LUCIUS*** *is deflated but not surprised)*

No, no, I guess you wouldn’t, he was a little before your time. Anyway, Scipio Africanus supposedly spent thirty talents on the funerary games of his father. I know, I wish I had that sort of cash.

Anyway, here’s your ticket. Now keep it close. You see that number on there? That’s your seat number, so don’t lose it. No ticket, no entry. They’re very strict.

*(Slowly, the hubbub of commerce gives way to the roar of a crowd looking forward to a day at the games.* ***LUCIUS****’ footsteps echo through the paved, enclosed corridor and burst out onto the arena)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

And here we are. The Games! You never forget your first time.

Unfortunately, we’re up here in the cheap seats. As with all life in the empire, seating is arranged according to very strict social hierarchies. Down there, right at the front, that’s where the elite sit. Consuls, senators, the odd emperor if they ever dared to come to Britannia. Those are definitely the best seats.

Close enough to the action so they don’t have to squint, but also so everyone can see them.

A little higher up, on the second level, you have the local bigwigs. Magistrates, government officials – you know, the kind that are responsible for your taxes. Please don’t throw anything at them, save the rotten fruit for later.

One rung above them, on the third level, that’s where we sit. The freemen. Ordinary Roman citizens. The plebs, basically.

And finally, right at the back, you have the poor and the women. It’s not really fair in many ways, but you can’t mess with the hierarchy less you get snubbed by the right people… or attract the wrong ones.

Oh, I forgot to ask, have you gone to the toilet? Yes, a bit crude I know but it’s worth asking as there are no…

*(****LUCIUS*** *coughs lightly, trying to find the delicate words)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

…facilities in the amphitheatre. 7,000 people and nowhere to do your business. Doesn’t bear thinking about sometimes. You’re fine? Alright then, let take our seats.

*(The roar of the arena continues, complemented by the sound of footsteps walking up the steps towards their seating.)*

Ok then, these are pretty good seats. Definitely not as bad as I expected, and it’s a relatively nice day out which is a rarity in these parts. We don’t have the luxury of a velarium here of course. Oh, sorry, a velarium is a curtain type roof or awning they draw over the Colosseum to shelter the crowd from the sun or the rain. No chance of any sun happening here though, bloody British weather.

*(****LUCIUS*** *grunts slightly as he sits down and sighs as he waits for the events to begin)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

We’re just waiting for the games to begin now. Now, I don’t know what you you’ve heard about the games. Some people think it’s wall to wall cruelty, where the deliberate torture and death of men and beasts is played out for the amusement of the crowd.

*(****LUCIUS*** *catches what he is saying and is keen not to put his friend off too soon. He abruptly stops talking and takes a moment to judge his words)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

And… look… they’re not entirely wrong. There’s no set playlist for these things. Each performance is different, with some games being shorter or longer, or there being no bloodshed at all. All a bit boring when that happens. But at least there is an edicta muneris, basically a poster advertising the games and what to expect.

In principle, you can expect a wild beast hunt in the morning – the venationes. We don’t get particularly exotic animals out this way of course, but I’ve heard tell of games with lions, bulls, rhinoceros, …even an elephant that bowed before the emperor. As the empire grows, so does its appetite for the weird and wonderful.

*(A slight cheer and applause break from the crowd)*

Look, here they come. Ahh, it’s only a bear today. I suppose it’s better than nothing. Sometimes they will pit dogs against the animals, or wild beasts against other wild beasts.

Today though, it’s a team of human hunters. Look, a number of them are armed with bows. That one, the bestiarii, has a spear. A real test of man against nature. Sometimes though you can see the animal is afraid or driven mad through being cooped up in a cage all day, and the whole thing seems a bit, well, cruel to some people.

Although that’s not a patch on what we can expect next. If you have a weak stomach, feel free to nip out and grab some lunch because at midday we have the executions, the ludi meridiani.

Local ne’er-do-wells who probably ran afoul of one of the bigwigs down there in the front row.

And don’t expect the death to be as quick and painless as possible. If they’re unlucky, they become unwitting actors in a play where their character makes a very terminal exit.

*(****LUCIUS****’ friend disbelieves him, and gives him a glance that almost hints at their disbelief and disapproval of the morbid joke)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

Don’t look at me like that, it’s true. I’ve seen it.

There was one games I attended where the main character was meant to portray the Greek titan Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and was punished by having his liver pecked out by an eagle every night.

No, they didn’t train an eagle to peck out his liver, don’t be stupid. No, they just crucified him. Nasty way to go either way of course.

Another criminal was condemned to play the Greek hero Orpheus who soothed a bear with his beautiful singing. Turns out real bears don’t so much care for music, and the “actor” was torn to shreds.

*(The thought of the barbaric acts on the sands gives* ***LUCIUS*** *a brief pause, but only so he can muse on Greek theatre)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

In hindsight, a lot of the Greek plays have unpleasant death scenes. Must be something in the water. Speaking of, can you pick us up something to drink on the way back?

No one would blame you for not wanting to see the midday entertainment, but make sure you’re back for the afternoon because that’s when the good stuff happens. The big attraction. The main event. The gladiators.

*(The sound of the crowd dies away as the friend goes to deal with their call of nature. After a few seconds the crowd fades back, together with the boom of an announcer introducing the gladiators.* ***LUCIUS*** *begins talking over the top of him)*

**LUCIUS**

Hurry, the gladiators are making their way into the arena! Oooh, we have a good line up today. There’s Priscus the Murmillo. He’s the one with the fish on his helmet, carrying a rectangular shield and short sword. And Rhoemetalces the Thraex, armed with a square shield, griffin helmet and signature curved blade or sica. Behind them, you have Ambiorix the Retiarius, with the net and trident and Mago the Hoplomachus, with the spear, shield and plumed helmet.

No Essedarius this time. That’s a charioteer by the way. I’ve also heard tell of Gladiatrix performing around the empire too, lady gladiators! Shouldn’t be allowed if you ask me, women fighting in the games. Why doesn’t the emperor outlaw them? I don’t know, its political correctness gone mad.

There they go, walking out onto the sand. Magnificent sight. You can see why they’re popular with the ladies. You see the Summa Rudis walking out with them, he’s like a referee of sorts. They are there to make sure both parties play fair.

And hovering over there by the entrance to the sands is the lorarius. He’s there to whip reluctant fighters back into the arena.

*(The sound of enthusiastic whipping can be heard)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

Although I think he’s getting into it a bit too much if you ask me.

What’s that? No, the gladiators don’t have to salute the local nobles. Yes, I know it’s a famous phrase, “Hail Caesar. Those who are about to die, salute you”, but Caesar’s not here, is he?

Wait, shush, the fight is about to begin.

*(The sound of clashing steel and wood is heard, followed by the roar of an excited crowd.* ***LUCIUS*** *can be heard throwing in the occasional ‘ooo’ and ‘ahh’ as he gets more and more into the fight)*

Come on Priscus! No, you’re meant to dodge the spear.

*(The fight continues, with the roar of the crowd and the ring of swords colliding. Finally, a sword finds purchase and a gladiator is downed. The crowd gasps.)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

Damn, he’s down. I had five sestertii riding on Priscus.

So, contrary to what you might have heard, not every downed gladiator in the arena is killed outright. I mean, think about it. They’re expensive investments for their owners, the lanistas. Can’t go killing them all the time.

Officially, it is up to the editors or other patrons of the games to decide the fate of the gladiator. How they make this decision though depends on the audience. If the gladiator gave a good showing, the crowd will ask for mercy. If not, well, bad luck for the gladiator, I guess.

Priscus gave as good as he got so, he has an even chance of escaping with his life. Look, the editor is rising to his feet. Now, the hand gesture that seals his fate changes from arena to arena. Sometimes mercy is a thumb held horizontally, for example. Here though, a thumb held in clenched fist shows mercy. An upturned thumb though… I think you can guess what happens next.

*(The crowd is quiet, waiting for the signal. The signal is given and the crowd cheers and applauds)*

**LUCIUS (Cont.)**

A clenched fist. Priscus lives to fight another day. Good. Good for him. I mean I lost five sestertii but no, I’m glad. There is Mago the Hoplomachus receiving his victory palm and taking a turn around the arena. A good fight and well-deserved victory. Let’s hope Fortuna smiles on both of us equally next time.

And that’s it. Those were the games. Did you have a good time? I hope so because there’s another one tomorrow and I have 5 sestertii on Mago.

Do you want to go and get some food? I know a good bar nearby but you’re buying.

*(The noise and chaos of the arena fades away. All that is left for a short time is the music of the amphitheatre until that too, eventually, fades out)*

**(END)**