

Flamma: the gladiator

Narrative

In the circular levels of the magnificent Colosseum, the atmosphere was becoming increasingly excited. Whenever he was scheduled to fight, this particular gladiator filled every seat. He was a legend. As always, the audience craved a thrilling and bloodthirsty competition.

Caged in a holding pen like a wild animal, the gladiator soaked up the spectators' eager shouts. As the river of chants flowed through the underground passageways, they energised him. His muscles tensed. Adrenaline pumped. He was Flamma – 'The Flame' – born in Syria but made in Rome.

When the circus organiser, Magnus Helvia, arrived to lead him to the arena's iron gate, Flamma needed no instructions. Being a secutor, he was a trained professional and familiar with the routine. Showing no fear or hesitation, for his self-belief was as solid as rock, he confidently strutted ahead, holding his weapon and shield low. At the entrance, Magnus addressed him directly. "I have heard that... if you impress them today... the Senate will grant your freedom." The news barely registered. Flamma didn't reply. He didn't even blink. Instead, he beat his sword against his shield and unleashed an aggressive roar that electrified the impatient crowd. His mind was fixed on the contest. Magnus nodded, turned the key and released him into an explosion of cheers.

For a short time, Flamma had the arena to himself. Rallying support, he paraded like the war hero he once was – a proud soldier who was captured by the mighty Roman Empire. He thumped his chest, which was heavily armoured on one side and exposed on the other, and raised his short-bladed sword skyward. Hearing the clang of metal, Flamma spun around to face his competitor – a retiarius who fought with a weighted net and trident.

Menacingly, the wild-hearted men circled each other like alpha lions. One was built for speed and agility; the other was built for strength and raw power. Whilst the retiarius' skin was unmarked, Flamma's body bore angry scars of survival. With a decade of conquests to his name, his tactics were well-practised and his instincts razor-sharp. Reading the challenger's movements like words on a scroll, Flamma anticipated every strike... dodged every attack... beat back his rival until he was exhausted.

More opponents joined the battle, but Flamma relished the challenge. There was no time to think... no time to consider the names of the men who would become his victims. He didn't care! The stage became a ferocious sandstorm and the air rattled with clashing weapons. Bodies tumbled. Limbs flailed. Blood pooled.

The secutor's fearsome onslaught continued until – once again – he was the last man standing. Around him, the fallen retiarii squirmed in the dust. They were alive but severely injured and silently begging for mercy. Flamma had claimed another victory. The crowd erupted, showering praise and thunderous applause upon his shoulders. He bathed in the glory. It soothed his cuts and bruises, quietened his fury and reinforced his identity: he was an undefeated champion.

Waiting backstage was one of Emperor Hadrian's senators. He was holding a rudis. Flamma glanced at the wooden sword that symbolised his freedom. He'd already refused the offer on three occasions and this time would be no different. With a firm shake of the head, he signalled his decision.



“But—” the senator began.

“Freedom means nothing to me!” Flamma interrupted. “I’ve no home to return to... no family waiting.”

“You’re coming to the end of your career,” the senator reminded him. “A fee could be placed on your head at any time... If that happens, fame won’t protect you!”

“I’m worth more to Rome alive than dead!” the gladiator barked, turning his back on the unwelcome visitor.

“Of course, you’re one of the greatest of our time, yet the next contest could be your last,” the governor added, offering the sword once more.

“Then so be it.” Flamma declared calmly. “Death will offer me honourable freedom, and – when my time comes – I’ll gladly accept it.” The gladiator held the senator’s astonished gaze, approached him and pushed the weapon away for what would be the final time.

secutor – an experienced, heavyweight gladiator who wore armour and fought with a sword and shield

retiarius (plural – retiarrii) – an athletic gladiator who fought with a weighted net and trident

‘fee on your head’ – a wealthy Roman could pay to have a certain gladiator fight to their death

