



## Gladiator

PUTT. PUTT.

Isalius looked down at the craters forming in the sand at his feet. Beads of sweat flowed along his bowed forehead and crashed to the ground. Underneath him, he felt the ground shake and dust fall from the ceiling.

The crowd were growing impatient.

An almighty roar erupted from the stands, followed by chants of “Iugula!” He knew what that meant. Poor old Verius had been bested. He was at the mercy of the Emperor now. Isalius ran a whetstone across the edge of his blade and waited to hear the decision.

Much like his weapon, it was a double-edged sword. If the Emperor sentenced his old friend to die, then he’d been losing one of the few people left in his life who he cared for. On the other hand, if he was allowed to live, the crowd would be even more desperate for blood when he stepped out on the sand.

Even though this was Isalius’s tenth fight in as many weeks, he was still terrified. His arms and legs were crisscrossed with scars and his left eye was permanently closed. He’d lost it fighting a bear in his first fight. The Emperor had tried to punish him quickly for his crime, but Isalius had overcome the beast. He’d taken great delight in the look of disgust on the Emperor’s face.

In the end, it hadn’t mattered. He’d been sentenced to fight in the arena until he died. There was a faint glimmer of hope that he might be freed if he showed himself to be a great warrior. He doubted the Emperor would allow that.

He thought back to the moment he’d been arrested. He’d been caught fighting a palace guard outside of an inn. He hadn’t known the man was a guard and it hadn’t been his fault that he’d humiliated him. The Emperor didn’t want to see his guards publicly shamed, though, and so he’d been arrested and sent to the arena.

A groan of disappointment filtered down into the cave below the stands. Isalius knew his friend had been spared. “Well done, old friend,” he said to himself. He stood up and gripped his sword. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and flexed his bare feet on the sand.

When Versius stepped through the iron gate, Isalius gave him a brief hug. He noticed a deep cut in the back of his thigh. Maybe his friend might not be so lucky after all.

The guard shouted at him to hurry up. Isalius stepped forward and across the threshold. The cheers from the crowd drowned out all other noise. On the other side of the arena, he could just make out the smiling outline of his nemesis sat high in the sheltered box.

Isalius raised his sword and pumped his fists at the crowd. He knew they wanted blood. They didn’t care whose it was. In the distance, a second iron gate was being slowly opened. Isalius spread his feet and steadied himself. From out of the darkness, the low growl of a pair of tigers chilled him to the bone.



## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word tells you that Isalius was looking down?
2. Find a word or phrase that tells you that Versus had been beaten.
3. What does the phrase “A faint glimmer of hope” mean?
4. Find a word or phrase that tells you Isalius had embarrassed the guard.
5. What is a nemesis?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

- R** For how many weeks had Isalius been fighting?
- S** What happened in the arena once Verius was beaten?
- I** What is Isalius going to have to fight?
- R** How did Isalius lose an eye?
- E** Explain how you know the Emperor doesn’t like Isalius. Use evidence from the text.
- P** Write the next paragraph in the narrative.

Answers:

1. Bowed
2. Bested
3. There was a tiny bit of hope
4. Humiliated
5. An important enemy or rival

R: Ten

S: The Emperor decided whether he would live or die

I: A pair of tigers

R: Fighting a bear

E: Accept explanations that discuss the emperor wanting him to fight until he is dead, the look of disgust on his face when he kills the bear, the fact he is smiling when Isalius enters the arena.