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## **The Gladiator and the Hitman**

*“Fear is that which you are not. Fear is the opposite of Love, which you have created in your reality so that you may know experientially That Which You Are.”*

*-Neal Donald Walsh*

I saw with different eyes now. I found the inmates fascinating. Everyone seemed to have a unique mystique. I was making a very real connection with this absurd community. And I felt deep affection for each and every one of its members.

One morning, as I was working out in the gym, a kid in his early twenties sauntered up. He had a pushed-in nose and an explosive vibe. He was hard and street-tough. I sensed that he was a fighter. Deadpan, he extended his hand and said his name was Saheed and that he'd heard I trained professional fighters. I was so startled for a moment, but regained my composure and replied that I'd been in the boxing “game” out in the world but had no interest in it anymore.

His face fell. He looked at me almost pleadingly. “The boxing championships are comin’ up, man” he said. “I wanna fight the dude who beat me last year – the only guy who ever beat me!” He had lost face and needed to redeem himself, but needed someone to train him. “If you take me on,” he pleaded, “I’ll do anything you say.”

I told Saheed that I needed to think about it and would get back to him the next day. My first reaction was to say no. I wanted no part of boxing. My life was now about

meditation. I adhered to nonviolence, not to mention self-preservation – why would I want to get mixed up with someone who was dangerous? But as I shook his hand and turned to leave, he smiled at me, and his hard, intimidating face lit up with an expression so sweet that I was totally disarmed. It was as if his smile released a different person hiding behind a tough-guy exterior.

As I began walking back to my cell block, an inmate I knew caught up with me. He had seen me talking to Saheed. “That Saheed, man,” he said, “Is a born killer. He’s All-In.” (A lifer with nothing to lose.) Word on him is he’ll take you out in a split second if he thinks he can’t trust you.”

I thanked my advisor, believing what he said. But in that smile of Saheed’s I saw something vulnerable and worthwhile that made me pause. Baba said there is a greatness in everyone – we are all divine beings and should see God in each other. In that brief encounter with a young killer, who’d never had anyone in his life he could trust, I experienced the truth of that teaching. I intuited that I would be safe with Saheed, as long as I came from my heart and related to that place of truth in him. I also saw this new relationship as a great opportunity to once again face my insecurities. Excitement and resolve welled up as I felt myself being guided from within. My mind was nervous, but my heart was wide open. So before I went to sleep that night, I made a commitment to fully accept the challenge before me and welcome this young gladiator into my life.

Next morning I returned to the gym to meet Saheed. As soon as he saw me he waved and trotted over, smiling as if he already knew my decision.

I laid out for him the training schedule I envisioned for the next few months. The first thing I brought up was his weight—at almost 180 pounds, he was carrying too much.

His body was very muscular, but overly bulky, too dense and heavy. His natural fighting weight was 160—middleweight.

Saheed was really turned on by everything I said, as if he'd just come alive. I knew that for our relationship to work, it was essential to cultivate and maintain the budding faith and trust between us. Over the years, I'd learned a lot about success, but it wasn't until I began meditating that I understood what success really was. I wanted Saheed to recognize that true faith and trust actually came from within himself. No one could give it to him. I wanted him to understand that with this feeling, anyone could do anything. It was all about our relationship to our own Self. For most people, success was fleeting. With true faith and trust, success never leaves—we live in constant communion with it.

I asked Saheed to tell me about his opponent—the inmate who had beaten him the previous year. He admitted that he'd been doing a lot of drugs at that time, not training hard, and getting locked up continuously for all kinds of stupid things. He'd had no trainer for that fight. "I'm so happy that you're with me," he said, tears welling up in his eyes. "I was goin' down, man. I was about to do something crazy. I have so much tension inside me that sometimes I feel like I'm going to explode." As Saheed spoke so poignantly with me, it was hard to believe that this was the same brutal killer I'd been warned to stay away from. He had opened his heart to me. Now I wanted to be with him more than ever.

Saheed's opponent was another kid named Outlaw, a great name for a fighter! According to Saheed, Outlaw was "one bad dude." He was only 5'6" and 160 pounds, but

could hold his own with anyone. No one his own size would get into the ring with him, so he had to work out with the heavyweights, and even most of them couldn't handle him.

“But can *you* handle him?” I asked.

Saheed looked at me disdainfully. “You put me where I need to be, and I'll show you what I can do,” he said.

Saheed was true to his word. He worked at every phase of his training with focus and determination. Following the new diet I gave him, he dropped almost fifteen pounds over the next few months. A month from the tournament, he needed to lose only five or six more pounds. Everything was right on schedule. He was even starting to look like a champion. Whenever he got into the ring to spar, everyone stopped to watch. He was like a ferocious, uncaged panther.

Saheed couldn't believe his transformation. He'd assumed the extra weight made him stronger, but discovered it slowed and weakened him. Now he looked lean, but was quicker and stronger than ever before. In fact, everything about him was lighter.

Meanwhile, word had gotten out that Saheed was looking for a rematch with Outlaw. This became the main topic of conversation, even among the guards. It seemed the whole population was getting ready for the big fight. As the day got closer, the energy built. Everyone started betting on the outcome. Since inmates weren't allowed to carry money, cigarettes were the currency they used. Gambling was just as illegal in prison as out, of course, but there wasn't much the guards could do about it, so they didn't bother.

When Outlaw showed up at the gym to work out, Saheed kept his focus. The two youths acknowledged each other, equally unintimidated. They both seemed relaxed and

confident. But they carried themselves in different ways. Outlaw was always joking around, carefree, while Saheed was introverted and contained. When they took their turns in the ring, they both put on a show.

One day, Outlaw's trainer ambled into the gym. Harold Konigsberg was a well-publicized, mob mercenary hit-man. As his reputation grew as a contract killer, he eventually became the logical choice for a Mafia family needing his services. The official estimate was that he'd executed more than twenty men. Those in the know actually knew put the number closer to fifty. When he was finally busted and facing a death sentence, he named names and confessed to a series of additional murders in exchange for life imprisonment.

Harold was once a professional fighter, known as "K.O. Konigsberg." Talk-show hosts and magazine journalists came regularly to interview him in prison. There was talk of a book about his life, with a movie to follow. I knew that Harold hated me because he considered me crazy – a "bug" – for meditating in the yard every day. He wanted nothing to do with me. Every time he saw me, he cursed under his breath and turned to walk in the opposite direction.

One day he approached me in an inexplicable rage. Shaking with fury, he pointed his finger in my face and called me a creep, followed by a string of expletives. I sensed that he wanted an excuse to go off on me but I wasn't going to give him one. I stayed quiet, until he finally stopped ranting. I said, with respect, that I was sorry if I'd done anything to offend him. Harold threw up his hands, continued cursing and stalked off.

Normally, I would have been so intimidated that I would have walked away from the fight, from training Saheed – from all of it. In spite of my calm response, that

encounter with Harold, had indeed, unsettled me – so much so that I was amazed by my rekindled determination. I wanted Saheed to win. I didn't need to show Harold up; I just wanted to honor my commitment to Saheed, and act outside of any fear I might feel. I could feel the *Shakti* within, abundant, strong and unyielding.

As I watched Konigsberg step through the ropes that day, I realized why he was enraged. He knew that he was seen as a violent person. That's how he had lived his whole life, and that's how he wanted it. He was completely caught up in violence as a way of life and in maintaining the vicious image he had created for himself. Anything that represented non-violence threatened that. So in his view, even being *seen* around someone like me could compromise his image. And somehow, in his distorted perception, that would have made him vulnerable, for like all violence, it was all fear-based. Now he was being forced to interact with me.

The whole prison was into this fight. A lot had been wagered. Saheed and Outlaw were center-stage, and this event also put Harold in the limelight. The very possibility of losing to me -- a creep, a weakling, a weirdo who sat out in the yard meditating in the freezing cold -- was almost too much for him to bear. On top of that, I didn't want anything from him. I didn't choose to enter his world. This, in his eyes, separated me from him, took away his control, and therefore made me the enemy.

On the day of the fight, a calm and confident Saheed and I stayed outside in the yard to talk. "Don't think about anything," I told him. "You've put in the time and effort, and the fruit of that work is all there, waiting inside of you. When you need it, you simply reach down inside for it."

I thought of the Bhagavad Gita, the great Indian epic about the legendary soldier Arjuna. As he is about to go into battle, his charioteer, who is actually the Lord, said, “You are a warrior. It is your destiny to fight. That is who you are and why you were born.” I looked at Saheed sitting opposite me, positively resplendent, and tingling with anticipation and excitement. He *was* Arjuna, the consummate warrior.

We were ready.

We walked silently through the quiet prison yard, then stepped through the gym doors into the tumultuous energy that only a boxing crowd can generate. The whole population had turned out -- the gym was standing room only. Guys were even hanging off the running track, high above the ring. I held the ropes apart for Saheed to climb through and stepped into the ring after him. Outlaw, dressed in a bright red robe, danced around in his corner, loosening up with some light punches. Konigsberg stood next to him, a towel draped over his shoulder and a Q-tip stuck behind his ear.

The referee leaned calmly on the ropes in the opposite corner, waiting for both fighters. He motioned us into the center for final instructions, which we couldn't hear over the roar of the crowd. Harold glared at me. Both fighters removed their robes. The bell sounded for the first of three rounds.

The fighters charged out, throwing roundhouse punches with everything they had, trying for a quick knockout. Oh, no! That wasn't our game plan. Saheed was a better, quicker boxer than Outlaw, whose one-dimensional reliance on his punching power made him vulnerable. I'd wanted Saheed to set the tempo. Winning the first round on points would put Saheed in control and make Outlaw more desperate and therefore more predictable. And here he was, engaging in a slugfest. I frantically tried to get his

attention, but with less than thirty seconds gone in the round, Outlaw hit him with a devastating left hook to the jaw. Saheed went down. The place went crazy.

For a few seconds he lay motionless, his eyes squeezed shut. The noise must have been deafening; I didn't hear it. My focus was on Saheed. Time stopped. The referee stood over him and began his count. At four, Saheed opened his eyes and got to his knees. He glanced at me for help. I signaled that he should stay down until the count of eight, then stay away from Outlaw until his head was clear. He nodded that he understood, and was up before the referee got to nine.

Outlaw came after him viciously, throwing punches from every angle. Saheed tried to keep his distance, but took a severe beating. Somehow he made it through the round.

When he got back to the corner, he looked at me in helpless frustration. But his head was clear. His training was paying dividends. He'd taken everything Outlaw had, yet he remained right there. Just before the beginning of round two, I took his face in my hands and made him look in my eyes.

"You are going to win this fight, but you need to clear your mind and get focused," I said. "Outlaw threw a lot of punches in the last round. *He's ready to be taken.* You must reach down inside yourself and find your greatness. It is there, this moment, waiting for you. It is your destiny to be a champion." We stayed like that until the bell sounded for round two.

Once again, Outlaw exploded out of his corner, obviously looking to finish Saheed off, but Saheed sidestepped him with the grace of a matador. Outlaw threw a wild

punch that missed him by almost two feet, then stumbled past Saheed into the ropes, nearly falling out of the ring. He quickly regained his balance and turned back toward the ring, but Saheed was waiting for him. With machinelike precision, he unloaded a deadly series of punches that left Outlaw out on his feet. The crowd went crazy.

With Outlaw wobbling helplessly around the ring, Saheed finally took control. His punches landed with uncanny accuracy. Outlaw dropped to his knees, and the referee tried to step in to give Outlaw a standing eight count -- a boxing measure designed to prevent a fighter from taking too much punishment. But he got right up and nodded to the referee -- he was all right. For the rest of the round, he fought back gamely, even landing some decent punches, but it was clearly Saheed's round. The match was all even -- one round apiece.

When Saheed got back to his corner, he was breathing hard and beginning to show signs of tiring. I glanced over to Konigsberg who was working intensely on Outlaw in the other corner. Outlaw looked out of it.

"Where are you at?" I asked him.

"I'm all right, coach," he said. "I'm going to finish him this round."

I knew he had more left in him than Outlaw, but I didn't want him to be overly confident and lose touch with himself.

"Listen carefully," I said. "Outlaw is hurt, but that makes him dangerous. Don't rush it. Let the fight come to you. Stay outside his range. Let him make mistakes, and then make him pay for them. Let the energy of the fight dictate your response. When you sense the opening, go after him, but don't trade punches. Do you understand?"

Saheed looked at me. “I gotcha,” he said.

The bell sounded for the final round. Both fighters came out fast. Outlaw pressed the attack, swinging wildly and awkwardly. Saheed stayed outside, fighting smart. Then Outlaw lunged and hit him with a hard shot to the body, followed up with another solid punch to the side of his head. The punches didn't actually hurt Saheed, but he overreacted and went after his opponent. Then suddenly they did exactly what I had warned Saheed not to do. They stood toe to toe in the center of the ring, and traded punches, hitting each other with everything they had. It was hard to watch. Any semblance of a game plan disintegrated. It had all come down to instinct, emotion, and will.

I watched as Outlaw buried a flurry of ravaging punches into Saheed's body, buckling his knees. Saheed was hurt, and tried to get away. Outlaw went after him, cutting off the ring, swinging wildly for a knockout. Just as it looked like Saheed would go down, he staggered Outlaw with a series of powerful combinations that I didn't know he had left. Now it was Saheed on the attack and Outlaw who was beginning to falter.

The bell sounded. Exhausted, the fighters stood embracing in the center of the ring, then holding each other's hands up in victory. The crowd stood, cheering wildly.

Saheed returned to his corner and stood silently next to me, waiting for the three judges' decision. A few minutes later, the referee walked into the center of the ring and signaled for silence. “The first judge,” the referee said, “scored it two rounds for Outlaw, one for Saheed.”

A roar went up, mingled with some boos. The crowd settled down again and the referee continued. “The second judge scored it one round for Outlaw, two rounds for

Saheed.” The place went wild — you could feel the building shaking. Then everyone started yelling at one another to settle down so they could hear who the winner was. Finally it was quiet enough to hear the referee for the last time.

“The third judge scored the fight -- two rounds for Saheed and—”

He never had a chance to finish. Saheed had won. Bedlam broke out. The whole crowd jumped into the ring to congratulate him. I stayed in the background, content to watch it all unfold, happy for Saheed. He’d performed brilliantly—and so did Outlaw. If you liked a great fight, it didn’t get better than this.

Saheed stood in the center of the crowd, savoring the moment. He kept beaming at me, shrugging as if to say: What can I do? It was easy to see that he was in no hurry for it to end. That was okay—he had earned it, and I felt deep satisfaction for having been part of it. Just then, an inmate carrying a TV camera struggled through the crowd and into the ring and tried to get Saheed’s attention. Around him, guards were clearing the ring so the camera crew could set up. *What a nice touch*, I thought.

Saheed waved for me to come over. I held up my hands in mock protest and shook my head. But Saheed would have none of it. He marched over. “I’m not doing the interview without you, man,” he said.

“This is your moment, Saheed, not mine,” I said. “You made it happen. Go! They’re waiting for you!”

He grabbed me hard by the arm and pulled me across the ring.

“Okay, okay!” I said. “Just let go of my arm before you break it!” Saheed burst out laughing.

As we approached the center of the ring, the huge prison broadcast journalist was waiting for us with a cordless mic in his hand and a bright smile on his face. Next to him was another inmate, half his size, holding a trophy almost as big as he was. The interview began with a series of questions about Saheed's take on the fight: his opinion of Outlaw as a fighter, how it felt to avenge his loss from the year before, how it felt to be a champion, and so on. Saheed amazed me by how well he spoke and how deftly he answered each question.

The moment came for the awards presentation. The reporter with the microphone (who was also, incidentally, the heavyweight champion of the prison and a professional-caliber fighter) read out the inscription on the trophy: "Middleweight Champion—Eastern New York Correctional Facility."

As Saheed received the trophy, his eyes were moist. Cradling it lovingly, he looked at the camera and said, "I really appreciate getting this, more than anything. But I can't keep it. It doesn't belong to me." He turned to me. "It belongs to this man right here – Alan Gompers. He handed me the trophy and said, "He got me in shape. He trained me. He was the one that stayed with me the whole time. There was no chance this was happening without him."

I wanted to protest, but looking into his eyes, which were filled with love, conviction and sincerity, I knew there was no way I could. I had no choice but accept it. As I did, he hugged me and said, "You're my man. I'll never forget what you did."

I thanked Saheed with my whole heart. He had given me far more than he could ever imagine. We hugged again and said goodbye, and I stepped down from the ring.

When I reached the floor, Konigsberg was standing directly in front of me, staring me down. His enormous body blocked my way. Looking like he was ready to take me “off the count,” he jabbed his finger in my chest. “Gompers, I still think you’re the weirdest creep I ever met in my life” he said, “but — you’re all right!” And then – he winked at me. I stood there flabbergasted, my mouth hanging open. I had no idea how to respond. He patted my shoulder lightly and walked away.