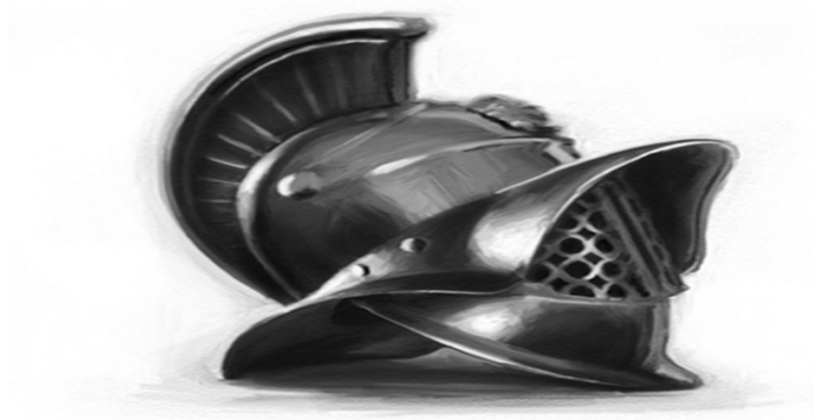


CHAPTER 5



Tata froze and looked up, searching the crowd frantically with his eyes.

The guard screamed at him, "Move! Move now!"

At last Tata spotted Marcus. He dropped his shield and ran toward him. Seconds later, Marcus was in Tata's arms.

"It's not possible!" Tata whispered, hugging him so tightly that

Marcus could hardly breathe. "How did you get here?"

"Festus brought me here after you were sold," Marcus said, barely able to choke out the words. "But Tata! How ... why ..."

Not even in Marcus's nightmares could he have imagined anything worse than this: Festus had sold Tata to the gladiators.

Marcus buried his face in Tata's chest, breathing in his familiar smell. Every day — every hour — Marcus had wished for this moment. And for a few seconds he let himself believe that they were really back together, that his prayers had been answered.

But, of course, the opposite was true.

Two guards grabbed Tata's arms, tearing him away from Marcus.

And then the lanista appeared.

"What's this!" he spat. "How dare you stop my parade!"

The musicians were silent, the jugglers and acrobats still. All eyes were on Tata and Marcus.

"Have mercy!" Tata said, struggling in the guards' grip. "This is my son!"

The lanista stared at Marcus, his cold, fishy eyes looking him up and down.

"Maybe you'd like to join your father in the arena?" he sneered.

Then the lanista looked to the crowd. "What do you think?" he bellowed. "A father and son against Cyclops!"

A few people shouted.

"Bring him!"

"Yes!"

"What a show it will be!"

"Or maybe you should fight each other?" the lanista said, rubbing his hands together.

"Run from here, Marcus!" his father cried. "Go!"

But instead, Marcus grabbed the lanista's arm. "I beg you! Please let my father go!"

The man ripped his arm away and snatched a spear from one of the guards. He pointed the blade at Marcus's eye. "Ever wondered how Cyclops lost his eye?" he taunted, lunging at Marcus.

"No!" Tata shouted.

Marcus staggered back. He lost his balance and fell, smacking his head on the stone curb. His head exploded in pain. He struggled to sit up, and through the blur he could see Tata being dragged away, the guards

jabbing him with spears. The lanista's wicked cackle rose up over the merry music.

As Tata disappeared, all of the strength drained from Marcus's body. These past two months, he'd always had the hope that he and Tata would be together again. And that speck of hope — a tiny glowing ember — had been everything to him.

But now ...

Marcus lay back in the gutter, closing his eyes.

How would he go on?

In his mind he pictured Festus's face, heard his barking orders. He imagined the slaves who'd been working in the villa for years. Their bodies were crooked and scarred, their eyes dead like statues'.

And then Marcus thought of the heroes from his favorite stories. They had desperate moments, too: Odysseus, who was lost at sea for ten years on his way home from Troy. Hercules, pinned down by a bloodthirsty lion.

Those courageous men knew terror and hopelessness, as Marcus did now.

But their stories hadn't ended with fear and defeat.

Marcus's eyes snapped open. He sat up and struggled to his feet.

He understood.

He would try to save Tata, even if it killed him.