

CHAPTER 6



Marcus went to the fountain and splashed cool water on his face.

He didn't have much time. Soon the parade would reach the gladiator barracks, and Tata would be locked away. The barracks was like a prison, with high stone walls and a towering iron gate. Marcus had heard that the fighters were locked in dark cells, their arms and legs shackled, until it

was time to fight.

Once Tata was in the barracks, it would be too late.

Somehow, Marcus had to steal Tata away from the parade.

But how?

He searched his mind for ideas. Again, he thought of Odysseus.

Odysseus wasn't the strongest man. But he was cunning. There had come a low point in the Trojan War when the Greek armies had Troy surrounded, but they could not break through the massive wall that encircled the city. Thousands of Trojan archers guarded the wall, ready to fire down on anyone who came close. Some Greek generals were ready to give up on invading the city of Troy.

Not Odysseus.

He came up with the ingenious idea of building a giant wooden horse with a hollow belly. He and his best Greek soldiers hid inside the horse. They made the Trojans believe the wooden animal was an offering from the gods, and tricked them into bringing it inside their walls.

And then — *attack!*

In the dead of night, Odysseus and the hidden soldiers snuck out of the horse and opened the gates. The Greek soldiers smashed the Trojan army and conquered the city.

Marcus searched around. All he saw was the laundry bag, lying where he had dropped it.

But wait ...

The idea flashed into Marcus's mind, and before he could talk himself out of it, he had ripped the sack open and was rummaging through Festus's clothes.

He grabbed a toga, a robe woven from the finest wool and edged with purple ribbon. Marcus couldn't build himself a wooden horse. But he could hide in Festus's toga, disguise himself as an important Roman citizen.

Marcus threw it around himself, covering his old tunic. The toga stank like rotten food, old wine, and Festus's sweat. Marcus fought back his nausea as he wrapped the endless stretch of fabric around his body, finally draping the loose end over his shoulder.

He straightened his shoulders. The toga dragged on the ground a bit, but it would do. Marcus spat into his hands and flattened his hair to his forehead, the style of a rich son of Rome.

Now he just needed a weapon, something to scare the guards so he

and Tata could escape.

Once again, the answer was right in front of him, on the sidewalk: the snake charmer.

Somehow, the old man was still dozing with the basket at his feet.

Marcus crept up, kneeled, and snatched the basket.

The old man was awake in a flash, hollering after him. "Stop him! Stop that thief!"

Marcus darted through the crowd, one hand firmly on the lid of the basket. He was terrified that the lid would fly off, that the cobra would spring out and sink its fangs into Marcus's neck. He could feel the snake hissing ferociously, banging its body against the sides of the flimsy basket.

Marcus's heart pounded, his legs wobbled, his mind swirled with fear. But somehow he kept himself moving until he caught up with the parade.

The music had stopped and the lanista was unlocking the gates of the gladiator barracks.

Marcus was almost out of time.

And he would have just one chance.

