

Chapter 1



GLADIATOR SCHOOL

Marcus held his sword high in the hot Roman sun. Sweat dripped into his eyes, but he did not look away from his opponent. That was the first rule of being a gladiator. Defeat in battle always begins with the eyes, the writer Tacitus said.

Marcus crouched low. He shifted his weight from foot to foot. The other gladiator would be fast and strong. He would have to be faster and stronger.

Marcus leaped forward and jabbed with his sword.

Smack!

It hit the wooden post with a hollow thunk.

“Marcus Cassius!” Villius, the manager of the Ludus Magnus gladiator school shouted across the training ground. “Do you not have work?”

Marcus nodded and dropped the small wooden sword to his side. It was the only gift Villius had ever given him, a toy presented to him when he first came to live at the gladiator school five years ago, after his parents died in one of Rome’s many fires. Marcus had been sold to Villius as a slave to pay off his father’s debt.

Marcus had loved that toy sword at first. He’d played with it every day in the shadows as he watched the real gladiators train. But now that Marcus was eleven, the toy sword felt silly. He longed for the day he could use a real sword.

