Running From the Gods

Tilly D.

No one trusts a thief, but trust has never ended my gut-wrenching starvation, stealing has. My hunger gnaws at me with its own sharp, relentless voice, arguing with every thought I try to form. I try to ignore it, but hunger is a slow killer, and theft is the only thing keeping me from disappearing.

The air is thick with ash and flavour. The smoke from Mount Vesuvius should worry me, but I've learned to push my nerves aside. I can't ignore the fresh scent of pasta curling into my nose, making my stomach roar.

The markets are alive. Children dance along the stone paths, sellers shout their prices, and everyone is too busy to notice a single loaf of bread slipping out of sight. Shoulder to shoulder, the people of Pompeii surge with purpose and I slip between them with mine.

The chance to quiet my hunger finally calls, so I slip past a man my age and claim the bread he once called his. I glide away, making the escape discreet and effortless.

I pause. My heart drops, and his shout rings in my ear. I run fast but he runs faster. Stalls are a blur as I pass. An empty street yells my name, and I sprint towards it, certain I'm finally alone.

I'm not.

A hand closes around my wrist. It's over. Sorrow builds like a taste in my mouth. I turn to face him, bracing for the consequence. Slowly, he lowers his fist and opens it, one finger at a time.

A red apple rests in his palm.

I take it with trembling, dirty hands as tears gather in my eyes. His back replaces his face, and he disappears into the market's stampede. Tears create rivers across my face however my heart starts to race as I notice the ground quiver.

A deafening scream makes my braid ache. An explosion of some kind of pottery makes me jump, and the scent of cinders makes me feel faint. I dart for the main street, searching for an exit. Each person I pass reminds me of fear. BANG! The gods are fierce, punishing us with anger. Ash covers the sky like a thick blanket, turning day to night. The ground shudders beneath my feet, a deep growl coming from the earth. Pebbles skitter across the pavement. A child cries. Someone prays and someone screams for the gods to spare us.

I force myself forward, my lungs filling with smoke as specks of ash settles into my hair like snow.

Smoke swirls thicker now, stinging my eyes. The city is turning into chaos. People shove past me, desperate and wild.

A shadow barrels toward me.

I twist aside too late. A shoulder slams into mine, knocking the air from my chest. I jerk back ready to yell, but I didn't prepare myself to see…

Him.

The man from the market. The one that should have hated me.

His face is covered in ash but his eyes lock onto mine with recognition and something more.

"You," he breathes.

Tiles rain from above. He grabs my arm. Not harshly, but not like before either. With urgency.

"You can't stay here," he says, pulling me toward him, "Come with me."

I should run the other way. I should trust no one. But he saved me before and he might be able to do it again. So I follow.

"Where are we going?" I manage to stutter.

He doesn't answer at first. His eyes scan the collapsing buildings, the stampede of terrified citizens. He's calculating, choosing paths faster than I can blink.

Finally, he says, "The harbour. If we go quick enough, we will get out before chaos turns to death."

The harbour?

"You're a soldier?" I ask, stumbling to keep up.

He shakes his head sharply. "Not a soldier."

But he is strong enough to move like one and brave enough to protect a thief he owes nothing to.

We turn a corner, and through the haze I see it. Hope lights up my face.

He points to a boat with writing printed on the brim.

'Gladiator traveller'

Realisation slams into me.

"You're…"

"A gladiator," he finishes, not looking back. "Yes."

He senses my shock and finally meets my eyes.

"I didn't chase you for the bread," he says. "I chased you because you looked like someone who needed help."

Without hesitation, we race toward our escape. The world behind us is collapsing, but ahead, a handful of survivors are already clambering aboard.

We take careful steps along the narrow plank.

Finally, we're on board. The sailors shout orders, pushing people into cramped rows.

I squirm in my seat, desperate for safety. My fingers dig into the boat we lurch away from the dock. The oars dunk into the water, slicing through the waves.

A thunderous crack splits the sky.

I whip my head toward the city just in time to see a burst of ash spray from the mountain. Pompeii disappears under a blanket of ash.

My breath catches. My chest tightens.

The gladiator sits jaw clenched and eyes fixed on the city.

He turns to me.

"We made it," he says softly.

I swallow hard, the apple still tucked in my lap like a promise.

His expression softens. "Stay close. It isn't over yet."

I know that. But for the first time, I'm not facing it alone.