

The Law of the Wolf

by Stefano De Bellis and Edgardo Fiorillo

Part One

Massacre at the “Sheathed Sword”

Rome, in the year 673 ab Urbe condita, third day prior to the nones of January

(3 January, 80 B.C.)

The sound of whetstone on iron was music to the scarface’s ears, helping him to concentrate. The man sharpened his *sicas*, or curved scimitars, the way a lion tended to its claws: he moved comfortably in time with the jolting of the cart, running the whetstone over the curved saber blade with measured deliberation, enjoying the moment even as he mentally reviewed the tasks that lay ahead of him, organizing them into a precise sequence.

He was honing his determination to kill.

He had a mission, and he knew he could rely on the three men riding in the cart with him to obey his orders, in unswerving respect for the feral hierarchy he had firmly established.

The youngest of the three, whom everyone called Puer, or “boy,” was catnapping in a corner of the cart, wrapped in a dark cape; the two others were chatting idly.

“There are going to be women,” said the Iberian, as he tied up his hair in a short ponytail.

The German laughed. “Oh, good... We’re going to crash a party. Just how many whores will be there, huh? How many will there be?”

The scarface ran his forefinger over the sloppily healed ridge of tissue that ran from his jaw to his forehead, passing through his right eye socket, now empty as a bottomless well. He checked over his sicas one last time and then sheathed them, crisscross behind his back, sliding them under the thick leather belt that cinched his tunic tight at the waist. He limbered his shoulders, rolled his bull neck, and then leaned toward the man sitting across from him and seized him by the beard. The German moaned at the sharp pain, grabbing ineffectually with both hands at the one gigantic arm yanking his face toward the floor of the cart.

“I’ll inform you when you can dare to speak to me.” He turned and jabbed his finger right in the Iberian’s face. “If either of you so much as dare to touch these women with anything but your blade...”

“I warned you,” snickered Puer, stretching both arms lazily.

“Drop dead, you kiss-ass,” the German retorted in a hiss, as he rubbed his jaw.

Puer shrugged and pulled his hood over his face.

The covered cart came to a halt with a creak; snorts came from the mule train pulling it, and the cart driver muttered to someone off to the side; an unseen voice responded. The confirmation of some previous understanding. The four men realized they must have reached one of the guard posts manning the gates of the City. There was another rapid exchange of words and then, with a lurch, the cart moved forward again. Puer poked gently at the leather rear flap in the cart’s covering and glimpsed the walls of Rome’s houses stream slowly past.

“We’re here,” said the Iberian, muscles twitching in bursts of excitement.

A few minutes later, they had halted again. The four men awaited their signal, three blows of a club against the cart's sideboard, and then climbed out.

Steam wafted off them in the chilly night.

The driver beckoned the one-eyed colossus over. "Go straight to the end of this street. Turn right; the fourth turning on your left is the alley where you'll find the brothel. The Sheathed Sword is the last house on the corner. You'll find it, no problem. There's even a sign – that is, if you lot know how to read... Anyway, there's no mistaking it, it's the only building on the alley that doesn't look like it's about to come crashing down any second, and the only building that has more than one floor. Go up to the second story. You know the rest. No one left alive," he said, completing his instructions.

The scarface smiled in the shadows of his hood.

"Give me your pitcher," he ordered.

"What?"

"Your pitcher."

"But it's empty. No more wine."

"Just give it to me."

The driver handed it over. "I'll wait for you here," he said. "Be quick about it."

His cargo of death vanished silently into the alleys and lanes of the Suburra, Rome's grimmest quarter.

The driver wrapped himself in a woolen blanket and shut his eyes.

At the entrance to the Sheathed Sword, five slaves, big strapping men, were trying to warm themselves around a small brazier, swilling back beer or wine of the lowest quality; a

couple of them were throwing fingers, playing odds and evens. The winter chill damped down the stench of the muddy street, impregnated with rain and the filthy sewage that the inhabitants spilled out of their windows. This custom made the neighborhood even more dangerous, since you never knew what might suddenly splatter down onto your head from above. For that matter, really, what else could the Suburra be said to be, if not the twisting, reeking bowels of shadowy alleys and lanes where the unwanted detritus of the City festered and rotted?

The alley that ran past the brothel was shrouded in darkness. For the five slaves, this was just a convenient evening out, all things considered. There were far worse duties than to escort their masters on a nocturnal quest for pleasure.

As they focused on the flashing fingers and fists of the game of evens and odds, they largely ignored the four drunks staggering zigzag down the street, handing a pitcher around and yowling slurred renditions of tavern songs. They were probably customers from the *popina*, or wine tavern, run by Aviculus not far away, in the next alley over. Nothing noteworthy about them, then. Except, perhaps, for the fact that the four men wore hoods and, once they reached the entrance of the brothel, they swerved as if to go in.

“Hey there, hold on, friends! The place is shut for the night,” cried one of the slaves, grabbing a club to bar their way. The other slaves continued watching the game: these certainly hadn’t been the first alley-crawlers of the night to be turned away, nor would they be the last.

The brawl was over in seconds, producing just a muffled ruckus and the choking cry of one of the victims, the last to die.

Nothing loud enough to attract the attention of a hardened inhabitant of the Suburra.

The Iberian and the German dragged the corpses into the atrium. Puer shut the heavy wooden street door, leaving it cracked just slightly open, wide enough to allow him to keep an eye on the street outside. The scarface methodically checked the ground floor rooms. They were all empty. He'd been told that the brothel would be hosting a private party and therefore, except for the guests and their enslaved bodyguards, it would be deserted; still, better to make sure. He poked his head up the stairs and heard the voices of at least two men. One of them, a short, slight fellow, appeared at the threshold of the brightly lit room on the second floor. He glanced down at the man on the steps, hesitated for a moment – just long enough to make out a smile on the scarface's lips – and then vanished back inside.

The professional assassin pulled his hood over his brow and slid the curved, short blades of the sicas across each other, emitting a blood-chilling sound, and ordered the Iberian and the German to follow him upstairs.

From his sentinel post at the front door, Puer heard women screaming, furniture overturned, and crockery shattering on the floor. Followed by a dull thud from the street. The German shouted, in his guttural, Nordic accent: "Boy, one of them jumped out the window. Catch him!"

Puer shot outside. The Iberian, leaning out the upstairs window, whistled and then called out: "He's on the other side of the building. He's limping but he's moving fast all the same, the little cripple!"

The mud had helped to break his fall, but it had also served to make Halfpenny look like a Samnite swineherd. In the aftermath of his leap out the upstairs window, his left ankle was

badly sprained, sending atrocious stabs of pain up his leg if he tried to put even the slightest weight on it.

“May Jove’s thunderbolt blast me dead! This time I’m done for. I’m a dead man,” he kept saying.

The chilly air was clawing at his lungs and his heart felt like it would burst in his chest. Bracing himself against the walls of the houses, shifting as much of his weight as he could muster onto his good leg and cursing the names of all the gods he could think of, he was hobbling toward the only shelter available to him within easy reach of the brothel. The dying screams of the whores echoed in his ears, while his eyes still held the ghostly image of a one-eyed monster smiling in his direction.

“I’m a dead man,” he told himself again.

The Vestal Virgin

Rome, in the year 673 ab Urbe condita, third day prior to the nones of January

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One of the four litter-bearers stumbled over a pothole that was invisible in the darkness, and the litter lurched violently. The other three men swore and insulted their clumsy comrade.

In spite of the commotion, Marcus Tullius Cicero remained absorbed in his thoughts.

Just a short while ago, a man had knocked at his door, bearing a written message that requested him to appear at his earliest convenience at the home of Caecilia Metella on the Palatine Hill; it stated that the matter was of the utmost urgency. The sun had set hours ago, but Cicero immediately recognized the wax seal and promptly climbed into the litter put at his disposal by the venerable matron.

Caecilia Metella Balearica Major, the Vestal Virgin, had requested his attendance. The summons was courteous, nothing peremptory in the text, but it would have been rash, to say the least, to decline or postpone his compliance. Caecilia Metella was the sort of sacred figure whom no Roman in their right mind would have dreamed of defying. In the City, her name opened any and all doors. She had served at the Temple of Vesta for thirty years, presiding faithfully and with immaculate dedication until her retirement. Word had it, moreover, that she had remained a virgin even after being released from the bonds of the priesthood. It was said that she had chosen to preserve her chastity so that she might pursue a life of physical and moral purity, devoting herself to the gods and, above all, to Rome.

Caecilia was a living symbol of a legendary past, the incarnation of the forgotten mores of the Fathers, a flesh-and-blood admonishment to the citizens as they helplessly witnessed the Republic's moral decline and fall. The ironbound sense of civic duty – the unwavering respect for forefathers and gods, valor, austerity, and probity, the very *mos maiorum*, or ancestral customs, upon which good Romans had suckled for generations, imbibing them from their mother's venerable nipples – had nowadays been polluted, decimated by the greed that was spreading through the city like a contagious disease. Power had been held for centuries by nobles of ancient lineage, but it was now being snatched away and fought over by wealthy merchants and profiteers, fanatical populists and cynical opportunists. This riffraff had been climbing the ranks of Roman society, one step at a time, until it had actually set foot in the precincts of the Senate. And yet, even as the ancient ways seemed lost and the situation looked to be beyond repair, the Roman people, perhaps in the throes of some obscure sense of shame, had turned once again for comfort to the sacred bonds of traditional values.

It had, in fact, been at a moment of looming danger that Caecilia Metella had won the Romans' hearts.

Ten years earlier it had been, or thereabouts: the specter of war against the *Socii*, or federated Italic tribes, was threatening the City. Rome's priests continued to draw only the grimmest of auguries from their sacrifices, throwing the populace into a slough of terror and malaise. In those perilous days, Caecilia Metella dreamt of Juno. The great goddess, deeply saddened, told the Vestal Virgin that the City had become far too dissolute and irreverent, forgetful of its age-old virtues and the abiding sense of rectitude that had preserved it in the past. In the dream, Juno said that, on account of this spreading decadence, the Romans no longer deserved her protection. Caecilia, convinced that she was the chosen bearer of a message from

Juno herself, asked for and was accorded a hearing in the Senate, whereupon she recounted her vision to Rome's assembled elders. The senators were so deeply struck that they ordered that the Temple of Juno Sospita ("the Savior") be scoured of the stray dogs, beggars, and prostitutes that had taken up residence there. In short order, the venerable structure was restored to its one-time magnificence. Caecilia, in her rank as Vestal Virgin, presided over the rites of expiation and purification, entreating the angered goddess to bestow her pardon upon the city.

Rome took on the rebellious Socii, fought them in open combat, and emerged triumphant.

Caecilia was universally acknowledged to have rescued the Republic by interceding on its behalf with the goddess. To the eyes of the Roman people, her intervention carried every bit as much weight as the military skills of generals in battle. From that time forth, the populace worshipped the Vestal Virgin as a full-fledged representative of Juno on Earth. When Romans of the lower classes saw her on the street, they bowed their heads or reached out to touch her garments, because it was thought that even physical contact was enough to grant unanswered prayers.

It was only understandable, then, that as Cicero rode along behind the curtains of that litter, he should rack his brains to guess what the matron might want from him. He was a humble provincial lawyer, still an unknown, only beginning to build his reputation in the courts. It seemed unthinkable to him that he might have been summoned to offer his professional services, but then he could hardly come up with any personal connections. In fact, try as he might, he couldn't imagine *any* plausible reason for that summons. A hurricane of conjecture was thundering through the young man's head, so great that his body reached its intended destination long before his mind.

The blows of the metal knocker on the villa's street door yanked him back to reality.

Arrayed in front of the villa were other litters, empty now, and their bearers formed a small, silent crowd; garbed in short capes, they were warming their hands around a small, hastily built fire. A slave pulled open one of the door's two panels, warily, and then waved him inside with broad gestures, tacitly urging him to move fast; as the man shut the door again he peered out, studying the empty street, as if fearful someone might be spying on them. His brusque reception, the secretive manner of his welcome, only increased Cicero's uneasiness.

The slave led him into the open-roofed atrium, instructing him in abrupt terms, devoid of the customary courtesies, to wait there, and was gone before Cicero had a chance to speak. He was alone now. The moon looked down upon him from on high, through the skylight, illuminating the room far more effectively than the dim light from the guttering oil lamps. There were no frescoes, but he guessed the walls must be a handsome deep blue in color; the marble floors were also dark in hue. An austere setting that seemed to give an added sting to the chill of the night. Cicero gazed down at his reflection in the impluvium, the sunken pool that gathered rainwater from the open ceiling. What he saw in the shimmering water was the very picture of a fearful provincial lawyer, awaiting he knew not what ordeal. He pulled his cape close about him and raised his hood. He tucked his hands beneath his tunic, seeking comfort in the warmth of his woolen undergarment. The haste with which he had answered Metella's invitation had made him forget to dress warmly.

The villa was shrouded in silence, with the exception of a low hum of voices; in a room somewhere, people were engaged in a lively debate. Their words, borne along on an icy draft, were impossible to hear clearly. Cicero didn't dare to budge from the spot where he had been instructed to wait. Before long, another slave arrived, this time an older man, with better

manners, and wearing a short blue tunic, beautifully made. This slave led him into the tablinum, a sort of waiting room.

“Make yourself comfortable,” the slave told him in a heavy eastern accent. “The chill isn’t quite so biting here.”

Cicero paid no attention to the slave’s odd manner of speech. He was far more interested in the details of the tablinum, a room that was well heated and brightly lit. A broad desk stood at the center of what he assumed must be the matron’s study. The house matched with what he’d imagined it would look like as he’d ridden over in the litter: simple but elegant, refined and understated. The desk was covered with neat stacks of documents; similarly tidy was the large *capsa*, a set of filing shelves for holding scrolls and paper, which covered an entire wall. The frescoes were all subtle, glimmering reflections and interplay of light, or else exercises in perspective. There was only one exception: a panel that stood out from its neighbors. It depicted a parted curtain, offering a view into a scene where man, shown in profile, was fleeing a pursuer. The back of his neck was hairless while a long lock of hair hung over his forehead.

“What is it that draws you to it, Cicero? The style or the subject?”

Caecilia Metella entered the room from behind him. She walked up to him and delicately touched his arm.

“Forgive me, young Marcus Tullius. I’ve taken advantage of your kindness and patience, asking you here in the middle of the night, but I need to talk to you, and necessity doesn’t always allow for the best of etiquette.”

“My lady, whatever the reason for it, your summons demands that I disregard my own creature comforts,” Cicero replied ingratiatingly.

Caecilia was on the far side of fifty and might never have been especially pretty, but no one who came into her presence could fail to be charmed and captivated by the nobility of her poise and her person. Her hairstyle, in keeping with the tonsorial style of the Vestal Virgins, gathered her tresses – by now a mixture of black and white strands – into six long braids trimmed with red ribbons; along with the gleaming white dress, her general appearance made it clear just how deeply rooted the matron was in the city’s past. The only conceit was a gold brooch; the only note of color was a violet mantle gathered around her shoulders. If not for those accessories, anyone would have taken her for a priestess – even now.

“You still haven’t answered my question, though. Are you more impressed with the style or the subject?” Caecilia Metella persisted.

“Styles change, as fickle as the taste of men; it is the idea that remains, *domina*,” Cicero replied. He’d clearly grasped the meaning of the scene. “Kairos, the god of opportunity, flees from us lest we seize his long lock of hair. Often we focus on the fluttering hair draped over his forehead, only to find ourselves gazing at the rapidly receding nape of his neck as he races away. No man can compete with Kairos when it comes to sheer speed, but it *is* possible to trip him up. All things considered, what matters most is to seize the moment, what matters least is the way you choose to seize it.”

The woman smiled at him, pleased, and then led him into the room from which the voices were coming. “I’m not going to bore you with social niceties, considering the lateness of the hour; instead let me introduce you to my guests. Perhaps you know a few of them.”

Seated on long couches arranged around a low table were the scions of some of the most illustrious families of the Roman *nobilitas*: Marcus Valerius Messalla, also known as Corvinus; beside him was Quintus Caecilius Metellus, and then Publius Cornelius Scipio, frequently called

Nasica (that nickname meant “benosed,” even though his nose wasn’t especially large; the monicker was a legacy from some prior ancestor).

None of the guests rose, limiting themselves to nods of salutation. Cicero merely nodded back in response.

In a corner, also reclining on a long couch, was a fourth man, whom the matron failed to introduce. Cicero dared not ask his name, guessing such curiosity would be unwelcome, given the deliberate omission.

“My customs may strike you as humble and my pantry frugal, but if you wish to drink or eat, you need only say the word,” Caecilia said.

“Thanks, my lady, a little water will be more than sufficient.”

Cicero’s throat was dry with excitement and tension.

The matron helped him to get comfortable and personally served him water in a goblet. Only then did Cicero noticed that no servants were present.

He sensed he was being watched. The four men around the table had the expressions of cats when, snugly curled up in their beds, they study a stranger who has just entered a room.

“Your name is beginning to circulate, here in Rome,” said Messalla, breaking the silence. The oration in favor of Publius Quinctius has justifiably put you at the center of attention in the forum. I know that you’ve studied under the finest orators of the City; unless I’m mistaken, Licinius was one of your teachers.”

“You’re too kind, Marcus Valerius. Yes, Licinius was my teacher and my master, even outside of the courts. I tried to treasure and cherish his teachings. Much was my chagrin when he returned to the company of his ancestors far too soon,” Cicero replied, before taking a drink of

water. “I’m quite sure that my oration on behalf of Publius Quinctius, if it had been delivered by Licinius, would have been a further instance of his sublime oratory.”

“Cicero, your modesty does you honor, but I heard that oration with my own ears,” Quintus Metellus spoke up. “You began your summation modestly, in almost muted tones, and then unleashed a formidable surprise blow. Your defendant was of modest origin and means, plebeian, penniless and without connections, while facing off against him was a wealthy individual represented in the forum by the great Quintus Hortensius Hortalus. You appealed to the common people’s desire for revenge, their eagerness to see the rich man ground into the dust, their sense of justice in the face of an overt act of iniquity, and their fever, so common these days, to rise to prominence in defiance of their social standing.”

Cicero was stunned. What might have *seemed* to be a compliment, when uttered by the scion of the Metellius clan, one of the city’s oldest and most influential families, now rang out as a ferocious criticism. Was this man accusing him of being an inciter of mobs, a demagogue, a sympathizer of the *populares*, the populist party? Was he alluding to his own ambition as a young *eques*, a member of the more elevated equestrian order, eager to make his way in the world? Cicero knew that the patricians turned a jaundiced, suspicious eye on that new class of the city’s wealthy, whose prosperity depended more on trade than farming. Because land, certainly not vulgar commerce, was still the finest letter of introduction for anyone who wished to climb the city’s social ranks. In Rome, however wealthy someone might be, if they owned no land they were inevitably and forever considered nothing more than a member of the vulgar and newly rich. For the most traditionalist Romans, the only measure of a man’s worth lay in the expanse of his farmland, and especially in the ways that land was cultivated and exploited. Trade was for those unable to boast a fortunate lineage: a low pursuit, beneath a patrician’s dignity.

Still, times were changing rapidly, and many of the *homines novi*, the “new men,” without a venerable past to boast of but with a rich present and a promising future, had already managed to blaze a path up to and including a seat in the Roman Senate.

Yes, no doubt about it, Quintus’s observation was ambiguous at best, and it demanded a circumspect reply on Cicero’s part in order to sidestep potential boobytraps that might have been laid, in case they were testing him by trying to sound out his political orientations.

“Let me assure you, most noble Quintus, that in loyalty to the values I was raised to respect, my deepest and most abiding concern was that of assuring that justice be done, whatever the social class of the parties at law.” Having laid that groundwork, he now steered the conversation to more neutral ground. “In any case, it was a mere disagreement over money, no one’s life was at peril.” In situations of this sort, the exercise of reasonable humility was always advisable.

Metellus laughed.

“Well, money aside, what does anybody care about these days, in Rome? Do you seriously believe in justice? Come, come, Cicero, doesn’t that strike you as a little naïve, nowadays?”

Messalla and Scipio joined in the laughter. The matron and the stranger, however, kept grave expressions on their faces; when the others noticed this fact, the assembled company rapidly regained the composure they had briefly abandoned.

Cicero was embarrassed for having failed to successfully parry a bit of clever repartee.

“You’re from Arpinum, aren’t you?” Scipio asked.

“Yes, I originally come from the provinces. My father owns lands that he worked and made fruitful by the sweat of his brow and his sheer intelligence, gaining sufficient prosperity to offer me and my brother the opportunity to study oratory here in Rome.

The others continued to ask him simple questions, verging on polite remarks and pleasantries, and until Cicero was certain of what they were driving at, it was better to give anodyne answers rather than indulge in catchy phrases that might have unintended consequences.

“The values bound up with the soil and the family are the ones that made Rome great. And those values are now vanishing, replaced by empty, meaningless ideals,” Caecilia weighed in. “In fact, do you see what I’m talking about, Cicero? You speak of justice and these young men laugh like fools. So let me ask you once again: do you really believe in justice? In spite of everything?”

“Without a doubt, my lady,” Cicero promptly replied. “If I didn’t believe in it, I wouldn’t really believe in Rome.”

“Well, then, listen,” the matron continued, “what would you do if you knew that a person, unjustly accused of a heinous crime, was facing the deadliest punishment possible? What would you do, knowing that this person cannot defend himself because he lacks the resources, and that his persecutors are almost certain to go unpunished?”

“In that case, I suppose... Why I believe that I would do everything within my abilities to put an end to that abuse of power.”

“What I’m asking you right now is this: how far would you go to protect the poor man or the vulnerable and weak? Would you risk your career? Would you risk your very life?”

The woman gave Cicero the time necessary to answer, but without once taking her eyes off his face.

“Yes, I couldn’t live with myself if I felt the remorse of failing to do my utmost to argue in favor of what is right,” he finally replied.

Caecilia scrutinized him for another few seconds and, with measured deliberation, a benevolent smile finally appeared on her face. She took his hand and squeezed it.

Quintus, Scipio, and Messalla exchanged knowing glances, and they seemed pleased. The stranger, however, was slowly shaking his head, in the throes of some unspoken despair, all the while anxiously wringing his hands. The man’s appearance was piquing Cicero’s curiosity. His broad face, with unremarkable features, seemed that of a commoner; he had the dark, tough skin of someone who worked outdoors; his hands were clean but not coddled, unmanicured and, indeed, callused. He looked like any of the many farmhands Cicero had met or seen in the countryside of Arpinum, working his father’s land.

At last, Caecilia made up her mind to put a name to that man, so starkly out of place amongst the *crème de la crème* of Roman nobility.

“Well, then, let me introduce you to a dear friend of my family. This is Sextus Roscius, from Ameria. His father was bound up with the Metelli family, by ties of affection and business. He was a client of our family, loyal and respectful of tradition, exactly like Sextus himself.”

Cicero nodded his head, and the other man lowered his eyes.

Caecilia went on.

“Sextus’s father was murdered one night several months ago, here in Rome. But he has waited until now to come to me to seek justice. Sextus is unable to enforce his own rights. It’s my duty as his matron – the very call of familial patronage – to protect him.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. What son would not naturally wish to avenge his father?” Cicero promptly replied. “That said, murders are only too common in Rome and...”

“I’m the one accused of the murder,” Roscius interrupted him, staring him in the eyes for the first time. His gaze was level and hard, and it bespoke a spirit that might very well not be that of a simple soul. Appearances had deceived Cicero in this case, even more than was customary. “You? You’re accused of his death?” he asked.

So that’s why he’d been summoned. They wanted him to argue in defense of a man suspected of murdering his father. No crime was considered more detestable in Rome. An authentic abomination. An accusation of this sort, if shown to be unfounded, might very well backfire, resulting in a death sentence for whoever had brought it to the attention of a court of law.

One thing was certain: if a trial was to be held for parricide, all of Rome would turn its eyes and ears to that judicial proceeding. After nearly two years of proscriptions and indiscriminate murders, without so much as a single trial, the city was bound to display a newfound thirst for justice. For years now, the law of the jungle had held sway in the City, might making right, and the time was ripe to toss a culprit to the mob of the weak and the mistreated, a scapegoat upon whom they could take out their bitter frustrations. The mob would surge to the forum, ready to acclaim the winner in this trial and annihilate the loser.

What’s more, a trial of this sort would give the plebeians grist for gossip for weeks on end. Rome was always ravenous for news, scandals, and blood.

The matron stood up and went to fetch a fresh pitcher of water. No one dared to continue the conversation until she returned and took her seat at the table, to the right of Sextus.

It was Messalla who spoke up next. “The accusers are Sextus’s cousins, and in our opinion, it was they who murdered his father.”

“Of course it was them, those miserable curs!” Roscius was suddenly red-faced. Until now, he had kept to himself, restlessly, as if all that chatter was nothing but a colossal waste of time. “I’m innocent, may the gods be my witnesses!”

Caecilia Metella laid her hand on his arm. That simple act seemed to calm down her ward, who went back to playing the role of unspeaking spectator.

“Impossible to misconstrue his words,” Cicero thought to himself. At that table, they were discussing matters that had upended Roscius’s life, they were arguing his fate, and yet he had never been given a chance to express his thoughts on the matter.

“Without any right by law, those rogues have taken possession of lands that ought by rights to have become Sextus’s property, as his inheritance following his father’s death,” Quintus went on. “Perhaps they assumed that, lacking money or political connections, he would have no choice but to shut up and put up with it. That’s not the way it went, though.”

“Poor Sextus did the best thing he could have in the circumstances,” said Caecilia, her arm still resting on the man’s arm. “He asked for my protection. Mine and my family’s. And I cannot ignore a friend’s plea for help.”

“At that point, the wrongdoers, sensing the threat and feeling cornered like a weasel caught by the farmer in a henhouse, decided that the best course of action was to attack first. They therefore blamed him for the murder that they themselves had perpetrated,” Scipio said, concluding his presentation.

Sextus Roscius’s eyes were glistening, and he kept rubbing his forehead with one hand. His unmistakable desperation struck Cicero.

“That, then, is why I was speaking to you of injustice. I want, nay I demand that Sextus be acquitted of this infamous accusation, and that he be restored to proper ownership of his

lands, his inheritance,” and as she uttered this decree, you could hear in Caecilia’s voice the tone of someone accustomed to speaking in the name of the gods.

Everyone nodded their heads.

Cicero’s mind immediately began whirring busily.

“But why did he not turn to the magistrate of Ameria to demand justice? His father may have been murdered in Rome, but the quarrel between Sextus and his cousins falls under the imperium, the jurisdiction of that municipality.” The young Arpinum-born lawyer had teeming armies of questions that required immediate solution. To think of accepting a case of this sort without settling all gray areas would be suicidal. “Sextus, forgive me but I have to ask: How was your father killed, where was he killed, and who found his dead body? Are there eyewitnesses who can testify to the attack? Why are your cousins so confident that they can simply take possession of your lands? What does it say in his last will and testament? And what’s more, why ...” Cicero left that last question dangling. He fell silent for a few seconds, tapping his forefinger against his lower lip.

No one dared to interfere with Cicero’s thoughts. Quintus went on taking small sips, and Messalla cleared his throat, perhaps driven by a momentary impulse to take the floor. But instead the man did nothing but straighten the folds of his elegantly made toga. Scipio was toying with the large chunk of amber set in his Tarentine ring: carved into the gemstone was the face of his most illustrious ancestor, the renowned Scipio Africanus who had defeated Hannibal.

Suddenly it dawned on Cicero just what constituted the most glaringly strange aspect of this entire story. “Mistress, oh noble Caecilia Metella... why me?”

The matron started to reply, but Sextus jumped in.

“Because no one is willing to defend me. My own...”

Caecilia lifted her hand, imposing silence upon her ward. “Because you have been so warmly recommended to us,” and then she went on talking as if Sextus himself did not exist. “Because those who watched your defense arguments on behalf of Quinctius were duly impressed by your abilities and... and because this evening I had all the confirmation I might need that you would be a worthy legal representative for Sextus Roscius. You have what it takes to save him.”

In any other situation, Cicero would have felt flattered to receive such a declaration of confidence from the Vestal Virgin in person. Not that evening, however. The peremptory manner in which Caecilia had just silenced Sextus made Cicero uneasy. To say nothing of the fact that the matron could easily have obtained the service of any of Rome’s most prominent lawyers: litigators extraordinaire would have come running at a crook of her little finger.

“My lady, I cannot believe that I was your first choice,” said Cicero.

The matron straightened one of her tresses and cleared her throat; gestures that suggested to the young lawyer a vague uneasiness.

“Let me tell you again, you’ve been strongly recommended by...”

“By the very same people who are refusing to take on this case themselves,” Sextus blurted out again.

“Sextus!” Now Caecilia’s voice was threatening; her eyes, open wide, revealed her exasperation with the young American’s insolent outspokenness. It was only a passing thunderstorm, though, a moment’s interlude. Her face immediately regained its detached, almost otherworldly expression, the same set face that she had maintained throughout the entire evening. “Sextus is succumbing to fear, he’s giving way to despair. That is unbecoming to the son of so admirable and respected a father,” she resumed, avoiding the gaze of the man sitting to

her left. Those words, uttered without a shred of pity or empathy in her voice, must surely have cut Roscius to the quick. And indeed, he bowed his head, crumpling inward like a spider scorched by flame.

Caecilia, once again the mistress of the stage, went on. “Let’s just say that the situation is delicate.”

The scions of the three great families all nodded in unison.

“A case of parricide is always a delicate situation, my lady,” Cicero replied. “We know what Roman law prescribes if a defendant is found guilty. He will be sewn into a bag along with a snake, a monkey, a rooster, and a dog, and then tossed bodily into the Tiber. In comparison, being strangled to death is a pleasant way to go.”

Sextus was bracing his head with one hand. He took a deep breath, as if hearing that reference to the fate that perhaps awaited him had driven him to an intolerable level of awareness.

“Who will be representing your cousins in the tribunal?” Cicero asked.

“Someone you know well, because you’ve faced off with him in court before: Hortensius,” Caecilia Metella replied.

“One of the finest lawyers available, perhaps the finest in absolute terms, my lady,” Cicero pointed out, with a furrowed brow. “No disrespect intended, Sextus Roscius, but it strikes me as unbelievable that a lawyer of Hortensius’s stature should choose to be involved in a dispute between plebeians of Ameria, no matter how serious the charges. And Hortensius never appears in court for any reason but to win. He hasn’t faced defeat in years. And that’s assuming he ever has lost a case.”

With a worried glance, Quintus Metellus looked over to catch the eyes of Scipio and Messalla, and then weighed in. “Forgive me, Cicero, you’re committing a strange oversight: *you yourself* defeated Hortensius in the lawsuit, delivering victory to Publius Quinctius.”

“Oh, no, well...” and here Cicero made a show of modesty. “I didn’t actually beat him.”

“No, I have to insist. I was there, I heard the magistrate hand down his verdict with these very same ears of mine.”

“There are nuances that might escape the understanding of those who don’t practice this profession... Please don’t take this the wrong way, noble Quintus, but that lawsuit...”

Once again, Caecilia raised her hand to interrupt the debate between the two men. “We don’t really care what happened a year ago, Quintus. What matters most is what happens in about ten days from today.”

Everyone nodded with utter conviction.

“What’s bothering me, what leaves me baffled...” said Cicero, “is this, and let me insist on this point. I have the very distinct sensation that there is something else, something hidden, behind this whole terrible affair. However great the scandal and shock that certainly attaches to a case of parricide, very few defendants can command the services of Hortensius.”

“All that lies behind the murder of Sextus’s father is the greed and recklessness of degenerate relatives,” the matron reiterated, shearing through the thread of doubts in which the young Arpinum-born lawyer was getting tangled up.

Cicero went back to tapping at his lower lip, as he sank into his own thoughts. Caecilia Metella, Hortensius... He could sense politics insinuating itself among the twists and turns of the case, more or less like the icy slime of a snail.

“Sextus Roscius, was your father in politics?” he therefore asked.

Metellus, Messalla, and Scipio exchanged worried glances. Sextus didn't react, well aware that Caecilia Metella would want to answer in his stead.

“No, Marcus Tullius, the dearly departed was in no way entangled in the issues of power and politics. He was an honest tiller of the soil who only prospered in direct proportion to the sweat of his brow. Yes, he was a supporter of Sulla, on principle, no different than any other sensible individual, even though they might live in terror due to the abuses of the Dictator and his acolytes. But, no, he was killed over a vulgar matter of money.”

The matron sipped one last drop of water from her glass and then asked Messalla to pour her another glassful. “Still, you have a point, Cicero, we have hardly been overgenerous with our information. But if you will agree to defend our friend Sextus, then I assure you that Messalla, Metellus, and Scipio will promise to provide with any and all information we may possess and you may require. What's more, you need have no doubt that Sextus himself will be an open book to you, so that you may help him as best you can to free himself from this terrible quandary. What's at stake here is nothing less than a deplorable case of injustice. And even if it turns out that your acute intelligence casts doubt on Sextus's innocence, you can nevertheless rest assured that I will vouch for him with my own good name and that of my family.”

The matron stared at Cicero, who suddenly felt he had turned transparent. For Caecilia, his doubts and his uncertainties were as easy to read as an epigraph carved into marble.

She persisted. “Show Rome how high you are capable of rising, prove to Rome that you are ready for her. So many men, some even born after you, are climbing the ladders of the Republic's institutions. You're still a young man, Marcus, but, considering the fact that you have no powerful family to give you a push, you will have to run faster and harder than the others.

Win this parricide case and you'll be the talk of the town." She took a pause, the kind that establishes a barrier between before and after, then and now. "Well, what is your answer?"

That night, Cicero had entered the home of Caecilia Metella Balearica Major in the garb of an up-and-coming young man, a promising contender, and now he found himself facing a decision that threatened to destroy his reputation and brand him as irreparably as any slave caught trying to run away. The lawyers who had turned down this case before him were certainly renowned, respected professionals, with solid reputations to protect. For them, with years of success under the sashes of their togas, turning down the chance to argue the defense of Sextus Roscius – even though the request came from Caecilia Metella in person – had entailed no loss in stature, he felt certain. He wondered whether the others had also been given such patchy, laconic information to work from. Cicero would now have to choose whether or not to lend his name to this cause, basing his decision solely on the trust that he felt toward the Vestal Virgin, her good name, and the aura of sacrality that surrounded her person.

The thought that an act of shameless and aggressive manipulation was being orchestrated behind his back, to his utter detriment, crossed his mind like a grim carrion crow flapping across a leaden winter sky. Deep within, he felt a growing instinct to turn down that case, to refuse that assignment. By now the dilemma that faced him wasn't whether to accept the defense in that trial out of a sense of justice, but rather whether to trust the situation as it was being presented; whether to take that leap of faith into the void, confiding in the good name of Caecilia Metella, or instead to step back, retreat, and place his faith in his own faculties of rational thought. For that matter, to turn down the case would be tantamount to openly declaring his mistrust of the matron herself, and that would come dangerously close to an open insult. Cicero certainly could not afford to make powerful enemies.

The Vestal Virgin continued scrutinizing him, concealed behind her own enigmatic smile.

“Has the magistrate already been selected who will preside over the trial and choose the senators to sit on the court?” Cicero asked.

Messalla informed him promptly. “Yes, it will be Gaius Fannius. A man of great rectitude who has heretofore unfailingly shown himself to be a fair and impartial judge. And that alone constitutes a rarity, these days. His presence ought, in theory, to ensure us of a verdict that, if not favorable, will at least be fair.”

“So one piece of good news and one piece of bad news,” Cicero sighed. “On the one hand, an impartial magistrate, and on the other an opposing plaintiff who brings an illustrious lawyer into the field, an advocate who’s entirely capable of captivating the mob. And we know the degree to which, these days, the moods of the plebeian mob weigh on verdicts.” He turned to Caecilia. “You all must certainly have thought of a line of defense you want to subscribe to.”

“That will be up to you to determine, once you’ve accepted the assignment,” she replied firmly.

“My lady, this situation is... out of the ordinary. With all my respect for both yourself and your noble guests, and all the sympathy I feel for poor Roscius, but at the same time, in obedience to the rational thought and the sheer wisdom I try to rely on in the performance of my professional duties, I am going to have to ask you to give at least one day to reflect.”

The matron seemed pleased with the young lawyer’s response.

“I will admit that I might well have questioned your intellect, if you had agreed to take the case only because it was me who asked you to,” she replied. “This request of yours only makes me more convinced of my choice, and I will allow you the time you ask to think it over. If

you have not returned by the ninth hour of the day after tomorrow, we shall search for another lawyer. This little meeting of ours can be considered adjourned.”

Caecilia Metella stood up, followed by all those in attendance. Quintus locked arms with Sextus Roscius, who appeared even more desperate than before.

“He won’t accept,” the man continued repeating in a flat voice. “He, too, will turn and flee.”

Messalla and Scipio extended their regards to the lady of the house and, heading for the door, bade farewell to Cicero.

Caecilia took one of his hands in both of hers. “We need you, Marcus Tullius. And perhaps you haven’t yet realized how badly you need the opportunity that we’re offering you.”

On his way out, before climbing into the litter that would take him back home, Cicero noticed two men wrapped in capes on the other side of the street. They wore leather helmets and were armed. Men that the praetor had sent to make sure that the defendant didn’t get a chance to escape. Not far away a cluster of young men dressed in fancy tunics were warming their hands around a brazier and staring at him. He required only the briefest of glances to determine that they were Cornelii.

M. V. C.

Rome, in the year 673 ab Urbe condita, from the third to the first day prior to the nones of January

(The night between January 3rd and 4th, 80 B.C.)

From the interior of Aviculus's *popina* there came a hellish racket. Packed into a cramped space, just two tiny rooms a few feet square, there was a raving crowd of drunkards. It seemed as if the winter chill had forced all of the Suburra's rats back indoors. When Halfpenny came within a few steps of the tavern's entrance, he slowed down, caught his breath, clenched his teeth, and tried to feign a relaxed gait; he turned around just in time to glimpse a shadow slipping rapidly into the narrow lane. As he stepped inside, he had the sensation he was plunging into a tub of hot, filthy water. Sweat, bad wine, garlic, and onion: it felt as if he'd been tumbled into a pile of waste from the open street market at the height of summer. As soon as they recognized him, a cheer went up in the room. Marcus Garrulus was a well-known character in the seedier sections of the City. People called him Halfpenny because, it was said, that was the price for which he would be willing and even eager to sell off his mother. The man owned two of the most popular and heavily frequented cathouses of the city – the Cheerful Priapus and the Satyr's Lair – as well as the Sheathed Sword, only recently acquired, and a future goldmine: Halfpenny wasn't just *a* pimp, he was the king of all Rome's pimps.

Aviculus called to him from the bar.

“What an honor, we have none other than the great and glorious Halfpenny in our midst. Have you scooped in enough cash tonight, O master of the turgid rods?”

There was a collective burst of laughter.

The newly arrived pimp elbowed his way over to the tavernkeep and grabbed him by his greasy apron, which covered a tunic that was, if possible, grimier still.

Aviculus's rubicund face was filled with sincere astonishment.

“Hey, what’s got into you? Are you that desperate for a drink? Take a seat, I’ll send the girl over, and you’ll be served. At your place there’s never any shortage of pussy, and at my place there’s never any shortage of wine.”

Halfpenny yanked the man close and hissed into his face, doing his best not to be overheard by the drinkers and drunks packed in close all around them: “Shut your trap, you idiot. Where’s Astragalus?”

The tavernkeep narrowed his piggish eyes. “Hey, calm down, calm yourself down. He’s over there, with his hands between my wife’s damned thighs.”

Halfpenny followed the man’s gaze all the way over to a rough-hewn wooden table at the far end of the room. A man who looked to be in his early forties, his hair shorn close like a legionnaire’s and his face creased with deep wrinkles, was squeezing and fondling Aviculus’s fat spouse, who was sitting in his lap. The woman brought in an extra stream of revenue, alongside the wine, by offering herself willingly to the tavern’s customers for a few copper pennies, obviously with her husband’s blessings. Aviculus, in his turn, felt entirely unwounded when it came to such matters of marital honor.

When Halfpenny came to a halt in front of him, Astragalus stopped groping the woman with both hands and whispering obscenities in her ear. He turned his eyes on the man.

“What do you want from me now, you worm? Do you like watching or have you come to finally pay me for all the medicine I’ve mixed up for those poxy whores you employ?”

“You’ve already received ample payment for your services in trade, by screwing my girls repeatedly during your careful examinations,” Halfpenny retorted, and then, addressing the tavernkeep’s wife: “As for you, your husband needs you, go give him a hand.”

She gazed at him, vacantly, for a moment.

“Move your ass,” the pimp snarled, grabbing her by the arm.

The woman wrenched free of his grasp, gave him a hard shove, and stalked off, indignantly. As she sashayed off, she displayed a brazen smile, thus showing off a gallery of bent and crooked teeth.

“You pestiferous dwarf, what do you want so urgently from me?” Astragalus railed. “She’d actually given me a hard-on even though I’ve guzzled three pitchers of the vinegar that Aviculus insists on calling wine.” Then he looked the little man up and down. He’d never seen Halfpenny looking so upset: his combover was askew, his cheeks were flaming red, his pupils were dilated, and the gauzy, expensive tunic he wore was torn to shreds. “You look awful,” he told him. “You might as well have just taken a roll in the mud with a sow,” he added and with a loud and careless laugh took a long slurp from his goblet.

In the throes of physical pain, the pimp let himself collapse onto the bench, his eyes trained intently on the *popina*’s front door; he was sweating from his injury and fear. “I have no time for your wisecracks, you veteran drunkard,” he retorted. “What I need is your help,” and he tossed a silver denarius on the table.

The other man reached out a hand to seize the coin. He turned it over, fingering it in his amazement.

“What’s come over you? Have you been seized by a sudden attack of generosity? Are you trying to share your ill-gotten gains with an old friend?”

“Where do you keep your surgical instruments? Do you still own them, or are you just selling magical powders to fools these days?”

“I still have them,” Astragalus replied, emitting a belch. “Upstairs, in my apartment. What’s happened? Did a client come to your place to fuck only to realize he’d been fucked so he stabbed the whore who was trying to rob him?” He poured himself more wine.

“Bandits. They took me off guard while I was leaving the Sheathed Sword with the evening’s take. While running for my life, I tripped and fell. I think I sprained my ankle. Help me now and you won’t regret it,” Halfpenny lied, and then tossed another denarius onto the table. “There’s another hundred sesterces in it for you, if you can fix up my ankle.”

Astragalus promptly tucked the two coins away in the folds of his threadbare tunic and ducked his head under the table to take a look at the pimp’s ankle.

“Ouch, that’s not good. It’s a bad sprain. It might be broken. Bandits, you say? What about your bodyguards?”

“Part of what I’m buying with the hundred sesterces I’m about to put into your purse is that you stop asking me questions.”

“All right, all right. Let me polish off this pitcher.”

Just then, silence fell over the tavern. A cowed stranger had stepped into the bar; he looked around with no regard for the twenty or so veterans who had leveled their eyes on his face. Halfpenny couldn’t see his features, because he’d immediately dodged around behind Astragalus, but he guessed that the stranger had spotted him.

He held his breath.

Astragalus, too, was curiously observing the new arrival, who walked over to the bar and nodded his head at Aviculus.

“A glass of hot mulled wine with honey for a penny,” the tavernkeep told him brusquely.

The man pulled a coin out from under his cape. He was armed: the leather sheath of a dagger hung from his belt.

“Is this one of your bandits, Halfpenny?” Astragalus calmly asked.

The pimp seemed uncertain. “I don’t know. I didn’t get a good look at them...” He was trembling.

Astragalus squeezed his wrist tight. “Calm down. As long as you’re in here, nothing can happen to you.”

Meanwhile, the hooded man was nursing his drink. Every now and then he’d shoot a glance in Halfpenny’s direction, making no mystery of his interest.

Two Fingers – a veteran so called because he had lost the pinky, ring finger, and middle finger of his left hand while fighting a gang of Teutonic raiders north of the Ticinus River – went over to the new arrival’s right side and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Around these parts, when you walk into a fancy establishment like this, you lower your hood.”

The man ignored him; he took a sip, eyes straight in front of him.

A second veteran approached from his left.

Now Puer was hemmed in on both sides. He wouldn’t be able to get his hand on his dagger.

The steam from the piping hot stews and farro soups was curling around his head, rising from the circular holes in the brickwork countertop that held the earthen pots of food. The air was reeking with smells, but utterly empty of sound. Those who had been playing dice until just a moment earlier had stopped, those who were raising a toast had set down their goblets, and

even Aviculus's wife had frozen to a halt in the middle of the room with a tray in one hand and now stood breathless, raptly watching the scene unfold.

Two Fingers carefully plucked the tip of the stranger's hood and lowered it slowly and deliberately, uncovering a long head of hair so blonde that it seemed albino and the face of a young man, no older than twenty. He studied the boy closely: he was powerfully built, he had scars on his arms, and he wore leather bands around his wrists. "You know, Aviculus," he said, "I'm almost certain that this guy's not a veteran."

"At least not one of ours," the tavernkeep echoed him, removing the glass from the young man's hands.

"Right you are, Aviculus, he isn't one of ours. But I've seen plenty of guys who look just like him, up north," the former legionnaire continued. "For example, the son of a bitch who did this to me," and he waved his mutilated hand in front of Puer's eyes, "really resembled you closely."

No reaction.

"Boy, did you know that it's illegal to carry weapons in Rome?" Two Fingers breathed wine and evil intent into Puer's face.

Aviculus returned a halfpenny to the fair-haired outsider. "You drank half your goblet. Here's half of what you paid, after all, what's fair is fair. As far as I'm concerned though, you've already drunk half a goblet too much."

Puer pulled away from the bar and carefully started walking backward. A forest of unfriendly eyes escorted him to the door and waited until he vanished into the darkness. A collective burst of laughter filled the room.

Two Fingers, at the center of the room, rhythmically swung his hips back and forth.

“Too bad, with all that nice blonde hair... A raw recruit who looked like that would have made friends with my cock even before his first taste of the mess hall.”

Astragalus, in the meantime, had taken advantage of the unusual spectacle staged by his old platoon mates to scurry away with Halfpenny to the next floor up, the garret, where they took shelter in the dank and musty apartment that Aviculus rented him at a reasonable rate. He set the pimp’s ankle with a wooden stave he’d pried up from the wooden floorboards and bound it tight with jury-rigged dressings torn off of a filthy blanket.

“I’ve had enough to drink for my hand not to shake,” he said, observing his handiwork with some satisfaction. Then he gave a tug to the dressing, and Halfpenny cursed.

“Stop your moaning! Your whores tolerate pain much better than you do.”

“I haven’t built myself a domus on the Viminal Hill by tolerating pain particularly well, you donkey.”

Astragalus shook his head and handed him a stick.

“Here, take this, use it to take the weight off your ankle. Keep the dressing bound tight for a week. If the swelling doesn’t go down or, even worse, if you start to get a fever, then go see a better doctor than I am. I know for sure that there at least a couple of Greek freedmen up on the Viminal Hill who know their way around broken bones. In fact, I know one that... Hey!”

Halfpenny was no longer paying him any mind. Leaning on the stick, he poked his head out the little window of the garret apartment to survey the street below. At the very edge of the halo of light designed by the tavern’s lanterns he glimpsed, in the shadowy penumbra, four darker silhouettes. They were still waiting for him.

“May Hecate take their souls.”

“Are you talking about the *bandits*?”

Halfpenny pounded the stick on a plank bed. A rat scurried over Astragalus's feet, who demanded: "What Suburra bandit in his right mind would come after you? More importantly: who would persist in trying to track you down with such stubborn determination? What kind of a situation have you gotten yourself into, anyway?"

"Nothing that you can understand. I'm a dead man, Astragalus."

The veteran sighed. "Whatever you say. If you like, you can stay here. Another fifty sesterces and you can have the bed. They'll never come into Aviculus's place: in this *popina*, we're all veterans who fought under Sulla."

"I can't stay until morning. I have to leave the city this very night."

"By all the gods, what have you done, raped a Vestal Virgin?"

"If only I had, then at least I could claim my right to a trial. But let me say it again, it's none of your business. Find a solution, how about that? I'll pay a sizable bonus if you can get me to the Cheerful Priapus in one piece."

"How much more do you have in your purse?"

"Two hundred sesterces, more or less. And they'll be yours."

"Typical of a miser of your caliber to try to skimp when it comes to saving your own skin. You must have five hundred sesterces, easy... and it's going to take every last one of them to get out of here."

The scarface, the Iberian, the German, and Puer assembled at a corner of the alley, just a few steps away from the *popina*.

"Well? All done?" asked Puer.

"Done and dusted," replied the Iberian.

The scarface stepped close to the boy. “Where is that bastard?” The man seemed calm, but the others knew that he was in a blind rage at the thought that the pimp had slipped through his fingers.

Puer pointed at the *popina*.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, he hasn’t budged from the place. But it’s no good going in: there must be fifteen veterans inside. Many are armed and they’ve all been drinking. They aren’t going to scare easy.”

“Look,” said the Iberian, attracting his comrades’ attention. Two figures with short capes had just left the tavern and were moving away, in the dim light of the lanterns. One big man was supporting a smaller fellow who was staggering like a drunk.

“Puer?” asked the scarface.

“It’s the short fellow, I’m sure of that,” the young man promptly replied.

The four men moved forward, staying in the shadows along one side of the street. Their breaths misted up as condensation in the chill of the night. They hurried along, hands under their capes, ready to draw their weapons.

Every so often, Halfpenny turned around; he could see them getting closer. In order to move faster, he’d started practically hopping along on his one good leg. “They’re right behind us, Astragalus, they’re right behind us,” he whispered in his terror.

The veteran, in contrast, didn’t seem to be in any particular hurry. In fact, if anything, he restrained him. “Keep calm, by Juno’s tits. It’ll all turn out fine, walk slowly.”

“You think it’ll all turn out fine?”

At this point, there was only a few footsteps’ distance separating them from their pursuers.

“Puer and me, on the little guy. You two take care of the other fellow. Death for them both, and not a gasp to escape their throats,” the scarface hissed.

Halfpenny turned around once more and this time he glimpsed a blade gleaming in the moonlight.

“There you are,” he said, “I just paid five hundred sesterces to a herd of drunks for the privilege of dying in the company of the biggest drunk of them all.”

Then he heard a voice.

“Pilgrims, have you lost your way?” It was Two Fingers.

Astragalus and Halfpenny continued on their way, while the paid assassins turned around to see who was behind them.

Facing them were five dark silhouettes, backlit by the lamps of the tavern. Metallic gleams signaled that at least three of them were carrying knives or perhaps even gladii, the short swords that gave gladiators their names. The scarface spread both arms wide, palms turned downward. The meaning of the gesture was unmistakable: sheath your blades.

“The Suburra is a labyrinth by day, so just imagine what it’s like by night,” Two Fingers went on. “And you’ve certainly taken a wrong turning. Continuing that way, you’ll find nothing, only unpleasant experiences awaiting you in the dark.”

The four men said nothing. Another ten or so men had just stepped out of the *popina* and were staring at them now; several were fanning out to encircle them.

“May I venture a piece of friendly advice?” Two Fingers continued, stepping boldly forward. “There’s a brothel suited to your tattered pockets just half a mile in that direction. I’ll bet that’s what you’re looking for. Excellent wine and, if you’re in luck, healthy women.”

The scarface tossed his head to his comrades. For the moment, the hunt was suspended. They filed past the small crowd of veterans, who watched them vanish into the alley. Two Fingers gazed into the colossus's face for a fleeting instant; he couldn't tell whether the man was smiling or grinding his teeth. He felt a chill deep in his bowels.

"And let no one ever say that the Romans don't know how to show hospitality," he added. The paid killers were already far away, but they still heard the burst of collective laughter that accompanied that mocking phrase.

The veterans went back into Aviculus's *popina*, and a party began that would not soon be forgotten: Halfpenny had left five hundred sesterces worth of rounds to be shared out among every last one of them. They'd be getting drunk for weeks on end.

The pimp continued complaining and looking behind him.

"Would you stop turning around like a frightened fawn?" Astragalus snapped impatiently. "Two Fingers and the others bought us all the time we need to get away. In the dark, in these alleys, they'll never find us."

"You don't know what they're capable of..."

"If you won't tell me who they are, then I can't begin to guess."

"I'm telling you that I don't know. They're nameless monsters as far as I'm concerned. I know as little as you do."

"Sure they are, of course you do. Well, they're certainly not going to give up this easily. Stay inside for a while, whatever you've done, whoever you've insulted or defrauded. Make sure you have a couple of big strong men standing guard. Well, here we are."

The two men had arrived at the Cheerful Priapus, the most famous of the three brothels Halfpenny owned. It was already closed, by now dawn was only a couple of hours away. The pimp knocked four times in a row and the door swung open.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I have no intention of walking around the city, nor of heading home. In a few hours I’ll be far away from here.”

“And where are you going?”

“Someplace you can’t come breathe in my face with your stinking fumes of third-rate wine.”

Halfpenny paid Astragalus another two hundred sesterces, as promised.

“Take good care of that ankle.”

“I hope that you choke on all those coins, comrade. Be well.”

“You can count on it! Be well, you little son of a wolf bitch.”

Astragalus cautiously retraced his steps. Carrying the bag full of coins made him nervous. The four men they’d managed to elude were certainly not Suburra bandits – most of those were if anything friends of Halfpenny, who often fenced their stolen swag. They had obviously been serious, highly paid assassins. Certainly not Romans, either.

There were plenty of things that simply didn’t add up. The pimp never went anywhere without at least two or three of his biggest and strongest slaves even during the day, so he would have expected much greater precautions at night, with that much cash on his person. Too much cash, for that matter. It couldn’t have been the evening’s proceeds, considering that a roll in the hay with his whores might cost, at the very most, thirty copper pence. What’s more: What had he

been doing in a brothel that hadn't even opened for business yet? The Sheathed Sword wouldn't be inaugurated until February.

While he was wondering about the whys and wherefores of such a strange night, he found himself passing right beneath the signs of that cathouse; the metallic light of dawn was just starting to caress the city's roofs. He noticed that the door stood half-open, an unusual circumstance. He noticed a rivulet of blood oozing out of the *vestibulum*, seeping into the alley's puddles and potholes. He unsheathed his dagger and stepped through the door.

He found himself face-to-face with five corpses, stacked one atop the other.

He reached up and grabbed an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling and carefully studied the dead bodies. He recognized three of them: Halfpenny's bodyguards. He'd never seen the other two, but they were too nicely dressed to be just any old common slaves. The old soldier only needed seconds to see that this had been a well-executed, quick piece of work. Whoever had eliminated those five henchmen knew death on an intimate basis.

He explored the ground floor: deserted. He climbed the stairs.

"Why don't you mind your own damn business for once, Astragalus?" he muttered to himself.

Suddenly he caught an overwhelming whiff of blood and entrails, and he felt as if his drunken intoxication had vanished in a flash. The room looked as if a typhoon had barreled through it. A low wooden two-paneled credenza had been overturned onto the floor, and everywhere he looked he saw shattered crockery.

He stopped to examine the body of a man bent over at the waist, one cheek glued to the floor by clotted blood. A twist of intestine protruded through a laceration of the elegantly stitched tunic, ripped open just over the abdomen; someone had disemboweled him. On the

forefinger of his right hand he wore an iron signet ring: the engraved seal bore the initials M.V.C. This man had surely been an *eques*, a member of the equestrian order.

“I’ll bet my left testicle that the two elegantly dressed slaves downstairs were your bodyguards,” Astragalus muttered under his breath, and he took a closer look at the dead man’s hands. If he possessed any other rings, the bandits had taken them.

He grabbed the corpse by its tunic and lifted it just enough to look it in the face. In spite of the grotesque expression carved into it by death, the features were clearly legible: he’d never seen the man in the Suburra before.

The stench of feces was overwhelming, and he retched helplessly.

Then he went back to exploring the room.

The light from the oil lamp illuminated two large couches arranged in an L shape and drenched in blood; in front of the two couches stood a low table with ebony legs and a marble top, where a bronze tray lay, piled high with dried fruit. Next to it, a pitcher of once-hot wine, now as cold as the air in the room itself; Astragalus dipped his finger in the wine and wetted his nostrils to help disguise the overwhelming stench.

He stepped closer to a corpse dressed in a tunic that clearly showed magnificent workmanship, embellished by gilded inserts. The man’s throat had been slashed open, and the spattered blood had designed on both wall and ceiling grim patterns of red flowers. He moved the oil lamp closer to the dead man’s face; he had a long blonde mane of hair and eyes wide open, staring and blank. These were no ordinary eyes: one eye was the blue of the open sea and the other was as brown as an oaken plank. The fingers of the dead man’s hands bore the marks of numerous rings that had once adorned them, in accordance with Eastern fashions.

Not far away were three girls. One, not much older than a child, with ash blonde hair and small, youthful breasts, lay sprawled, helpless, her skull cracked open, beneath a window secured by heavy wooden shutters: a single blow delivered with brutal violence. The two other young women, partially covered by a sheepskin but otherwise naked, had been dumped between a couch and the wall. Astragalus bent over and the glow from his oil lamp caressed the soft curves of a Nordic redhead, her skin covered with freckles. Someone had stabbed her, driving the blade deep between neck and clavicle. Underneath her lay a magnificent dark-haired Asian woman; the veteran turned her over and her face emerged from a tangled bush of wild black curls. Her nose was broken, the only visible sign of violence, aside from the mortal wound on a line with her heart. She must have put up a fight.

While the two men had been sliced open with a blade as sharp and hard as obsidian, and the young girl had been brutally finished off with some blunt, heavy object, the two women had been dispatched with surgically precise stab wounds, perhaps a lunging blow from a gladium, the Roman short sword, to judge from the width of the wounds. Astragalus had learned to kill in that same fashion from the drill instructors who had trained him in the legion, and he himself had then gone on to teach that same technique to raw recruits. There was something quite familiar, about those two stab wounds.

He went back to studying the girls' features. He knew Halfpenny's whores well, and he'd never seen any of these before. They were splendid, exotic females, not the usual whorehouse workhorses. What a pointless waste. He sighed and started searching the room for any gold or coins that might have escaped the killers' notice. He found nothing except for a golden hairband, which might have belonged to the effete young Greek with that two-toned gaze. He slipped it into his bag, along with all of Halfpenny's coins.

He put both hands on his hips and surveyed his surroundings. He'd stumbled upon scenes like this during the pillage and plunder he'd taken part in during wartime, but he'd never expected to see the same thing in a brothel in Rome. He scratched his belly. Halfpenny had put together a nice private little orgy. The two murdered men must have been influential and powerful individuals, if they'd been able to have an establishment opened just for them, a bordello that had not yet opened for business.

Brand-new, beautiful whores, barbaric assassins who break in and murder everyone in the place.

He needed a breath of fresh air and he leaned out the only open window; the city was just now awakening, blithely unaware of the midnight nightmare that had taken material form in those rooms. The rising sun revealed the marks of a pair of heavy sandals on the window sill.

Astragalus smiled and looked down.

“So that’s how he sprained his ankle, the sneaky little bastard. He was faster than any of the others to realize what was happening, or else he spotted them first. Or maybe he even knew they would be coming.

He shook his head, grabbed a goblet, wiped the blood off it with the hem of his tunic, and gulped down long drafts of cold honeyed wine. To the health of the dead.

“Tradunt”

Rome, in the year 673 ab Urbe condita, the day prior to the nones of January

(4 January, 80 B.C.)

Titus had no idea why it happened or even when it was coming, but happen it certainly did. At times he was simply catapulted into the past, without warning, swept helplessly away by daydreams and open-eyed nightmares. Perhaps this time it was the sheep milk cheese that had reminded him of Vicius Calpurnius, that diminutive legionnaire born to a shepherd; in every battle, once they finally came face to face with the enemy, Vicius Calpurnius would bleat like a sheep, so loudly and intrusively that he would make himself heard over the insults that the two sides inevitably exchanged in the last instants preceding the clash. It was his way of mocking the enemy: it triggered the hilarity of the veterans and it bolstered the morale of the young greenhorns. Vicius Calpurnius, a drop of the past that fell right before his eyes, suddenly sending him elsewhere. Vicius Calpurnius, who had died under his command at the Battle of the Colline Gate, two years previously.

An almond hit him square in the forehead, and the time he was experiencing brought him shuddering back to the here and now of Velia Aquinia's triclinium. The woman was staring at him with her worst glare of reproof, a weapon from which no shield could offer safety or protection.

"There are noble senators who pay substantial sums for the pleasure of my company. There are high-ticket lawyers, outstanding orators, who delight in my conversation. And you, what do you do? You ignore me. In my own home."

"Velia, my lady, forgive me."

Titus put down the chunk of sheep milk cheese and slid his way along the large couch, worming his way under the woolen blanket beneath which Velia had curled up. The pale January sun must have been high in the sky for hours now, but no household slave had dared to open the wooden shutters, given the chill outside, and the matron's *domus* remained shrouded in shadows,

only slightly brightened by crackling braziers and the occasional oil lamp. From the streets outside wafted up the sounds of any ordinary day on the Germalus Peak, one of the two high points on the Palatine Hill: servants unloading merchandise and foodstuffs into a neighboring domus, a distant flute being practiced, with the occasional flat or screechy high note, a rhetor scolding a lazy student amidst an oratory lesson. Outside, Rome had come back to life several hours ago, but inside Velia's house, where the hours flowed past according to a different rhythm, the night lingered lazily. Titus wrapped his arms around the woman's shoulders, as she lay on her side. She was no longer young, but the marks of age suited her nicely, like autumn settling over the countryside. Velia was still beautiful, though it was a different beauty now, tranquil and welcoming; most important of all she still had full power to kindle flames in the loins of both Titus and her other aristocratic, moneyed lovers. Titus kissed her soft, scented, naked shoulder.

“No one can pay you richly enough. Whatever sum a man is willing to spend, what you give him in exchange is worth much, much more.

The woman snuggled up against him.

“Titus, Titus... When you entered into my favor, you were a rough-hewn officer of lowly rank, and the only shred of nobility you possessed was in your name. Now just listen to you, you string together words as well as any shameless sycophant who's welcomed into the fanciest dinner parties.”

“All credit to you, m'lady. You shaped me out of common clay. Now I even know how to hold in my farts,” he replied, pretending to be oily and obsequious.

Velia broke into peals of crystalline laughter.

“If I’d created you, I’d have conceived you quite differently from the son of a she-wolf that you are. A wonderful son of a she-wolf,” and she kissed him again, with all her might, almost hurting him, “but still an absolute son of a she wolf.”

Aside from whatever expectations Velia might or might not have had, Titus had a point: she really had turned him into something like a genuine citizen of the City, or at least she’d taught him how to pretend to be one. He had enlisted in the army when he was just sixteen, and for twenty years now he had served this master or that under the standards of Rome. Life in the legions had made a man of him, but certainly not a refined gentleman. For a veteran, the City was nothing but a tangled stand of thorn bushes teeming with poisonous snakes, but talking snakes who could ruin anyone with a word: the city had no patience for the naïve or the uninformed, it chewed up whoever failed to understand the rapidly shifting set of rules, and then it indifferently excreted their nameless remains. A man who was accustomed to facing off with his enemies, his face uncovered, on a battlefield where the laws that applied were those of iron and blood, was just a newborn babe abandoned in a forest where Rome was concerned: in this city he was helpless, prospective prey and nothing more.

Luckily for Titus, Velia had him how to survive in the capital, and even how to relish the city’s complicated twists and turns. She knew how to match and even master Rome. No surer evidence was needed than the fact that she, a woman, left to live her life alone, had been capable not only of making a living but even increasing her fortune by luring the right lovers into a sophisticated net woven of charm and sensuality. She was the widow of Military Tribune Marcius Murulus Corvus – a man alongside whom Titus had fought, forming a close and enduring friendship, until Marcius died in battle with a short sword in his hand. Unlike other women left in similar straits, Velia had not sought out a new husband to guide and support her in

life. Her dead husband's prosperous and patrician family had offered to marry her off to her brother-in-law, who was also a recent widower, but Velia had turned them down. Seriously, her brother-in-law? He was ten years older than her, and what's more the man had an ungovernable lust for low-rent brothels and cathouses. No, thanks. That, however, meant she would also have to turn her back on the yearly revenues of close to a million sesterces generated by her dead husband's lands. Still, in recognition of the unflagging devotion she had shown to their son, Marcius' family had given her the house on the Germalus Peak, a *domus* of considerable value, along with two slaves that she herself had been allowed to select from among the domestic staff.

Velia, in contrast, had been born into a family of the equestrian order. After her husband's death, her father had introduced her to a host of eligible bachelors who, duly tempted by the sumptuous dowry that came with her, were eager and willing to take her as their lawful spouse even though she was by now older than thirty. She had spurned them all without a second thought and in fact had then proceeded to engage blatantly in such outlandish behavior that she sent the whole host of suitors scurrying in fright. Her home had become a salon attracting actors, poets, and artists of every kind and description, socializing with the sort of people no respectable Roman would openly boast of knowing in the forum. Rumors began to spread: Velia Aquinia had taken leave of her senses.

She had chosen to become the head of her own household, the mistress of her own fate. Perhaps she had loved her Marcius too deeply to even think of replacing him, or perhaps following her period of mourning she had grown accustomed to the taste of freedom and was now unwilling to give it up. And then other rumors began to circulate: Velia Aquinia was a dissolute woman, to hear some tell it; actually a lady of the night, according to others. However badly her pride was wounded by these tales of her activities as a prostitute working under

assumed identities in filthy bawdyhouses – or even walking the streets, selling her body for handfuls of copper pennies to the legionnaires training at Campus Martius, the “Field of Mars” – Velia ignored those serpent’s teeth and continued straight ahead along her chosen path. She liked to describe herself as a *hetaera*, a courtesan: true, she was selling herself, but more than her flesh she was selling her culture, her astute sense of elegance and beauty. Her body was part of the bargain, but only for a few select patricians. She had decided to form no lasting attachment to any man: if she made herself available, it would be for only the amount of time that any given, chosen man could afford to pay for. Without a reliable source of income, and without a family of her own, it had struck her as the best return on her own charms and beauty and the refinement she had cultivated over the years.

But with Titus it was different... With him, she shared the void left in her heart by Marcius’s death, a staggering loss that he alone, on this mortal earth, could grasp. It had come as an almost natural instinct to her to welcome Titus into her home, and into her bed. A veteran, a plebeian by birth but endowed with genuine nobility of soul, who had lost every penny of his personal savings at the gambling tables; a man her own family would certainly never accept. After sparing herself the fate that others would have thrust upon her, she had decided to rescue him from both his own worst instincts and from Rome. In exchange, she received his protection and his ardent affections: Titus was her own personal, secret antidote to advancing age and a crowded, noisy life of loneliness.

Still, the comparison that anyone might have made between him and Marcius, the man whose place he had taken in her bed, would have been pitiless.

Even Titus knew that all too well.

When he strode through the atrium of her *domus*, he never looked up at the wooden *sigillum*, a ceremonial statue that depicted Marcius Murulus in the first rank, gazing steadily at the crowd of his own noble lineage of *lares*, or household gods. Marcius had been a good man, a good Roman, and a good soldier, and he would certainly have now been seated in the Curia, or senate house, amidst the other *Patres Conscripti* (Conscript Fathers), had Hecate herself not chosen to scythe him down in the very prime of his life, at the age of thirty-four, at Rome's very gates, his body run through by a Marian lance. Titus had been Marcius's friend, he had obeyed his orders, and he had advised him on the battlefield when the noble tribune had asked for his help. The two men had discovered that they were kindred spirits, genuine brothers in arms. Marcius showed Titus the meaning of life and Titus, in return, taught Marcius how to take life. They had shared victories and defeats, shed their own blood on the same soil, and that bond had endured even far from the legion.

"Forgive me," Titus was truly mortified to have failed to show the proper interest due to the woman's words. "Every now and then, my mind just wanders off like that, without warning."

"And where are you running, my soldier? Where is it you're escaping to?"

"No place that's worth mentioning." The man was grim-faced and seemed to be on the verge of an uncomfortable and unrestrainable confession. Velia, in any case, was hardly surprised to see him turn the key on the lock of the coffer in which he'd buried his demons.

"I interrupted you with my absence," Titus continued, pouring himself a steaming goblet of honeyed wine. "Please, let's return to your story."

Velia did nothing to challenge her lover's reticence, she was growing accustomed to those sudden absences. Most of all, she was learning to respect the secrets of a man who could turn suddenly complicated. She started up again from where she'd left off.

“Anyway, as I was telling you, the other night Decimus Juventius Corvus came to pay a call on me.

“The oil merchant?”

“The senator. The businessman is Celsus, not Decimus.” The woman’s voice turned mysterious, sinking to little more than a whisper. “So, then, Senator Decimus Juventius shows up with ten slaves and two litters. He’s so afraid of moving from one place to another in the dark of night that when he does leave the safety of his home, he activates an entire legion. And he tells me to follow him. He claims to have a surprise for me. So I climb into the litter that he’s brought just for me, while Corvus climbs into the other litter and sets off, leading the way. The leather blinds are pulled down and fastened tight. It’s a dull, tedious journey, with all that jolting and lurching, so disagreeable to my delicate stomach. You know I always prefer either to simply go on foot or, at least, seated in a cart. In any case, after enough time goes by to develop a feeling of real boredom, I find myself in this great big villa. I couldn’t tell you where. Maybe out along the Appian Way.”

“One of those estates with acres and acres of olive trees?” Titus was trying to get his bearings. He had learned that a piece of gossip was something much more complex than a simple sharing of news, of events: it was the raw material with which a Roman’s public image was constructed, as well as a negotiable form of legal tender that could, frequently, be transformed into actual cold hard cash.

“I couldn’t say. To tell the truth, it looked like an expensive city villa. There were statues made of black and pink marble, fountains, a peristyle that had something Greek about it...”

“Nothing strange about that, if you ask me. This Greek style is becoming a craze. It seems as if all of Hellas has entered the bloodstream of Rome like a disease brought here by Sulla on the way back from Pontus.”

“True, but a little bit of refinement doesn’t bother me in the least. At any rate... there was a banquet, a multitude of invitees, lots of pilgrims, even some black guests from the African province. Torches lit up the garden and I recognized a number of well-known faces: young Catiline, Chrysogonus with his customary entourage of pomaded, scented, slimy bootlickers, a couple of quaestors, at least one praetor, and quite a few senators.”

Titus cocked his head to one side. “Really, Chrysogonus? In Rome? Odd, he ought to be in Volterra. That’s where his master is, the siege is coming to its conclusion and...

“Perhaps Sulla had no need of him, but I can certainly tell you he was there, and moreover, he seemed to be acting as the master of the house, the host and benefactor. One more thing, Titus, ‘his master’... what an unpleasant word to use. Chrysogonus *used* to have a master, but no longer: he’s a freedman now.”

“If Sulla frees you from slavery, it’s because he has other plans for you, some project for you to undertake. Do you seriously think that the ten thousand slaves he transformed into Corneliis after the Battle of the Colline Gate are now free to live their lives as they please? Whether you’re a slave or a freedman, a tribune or a senator, matters little: you sign yourself over to Sulla without reservations.”

“You all talk about the Dictator as if he were a sorcerer.”

“You don’t know him.”

“I know him better than you do. At last I can claim to have been to many of his banquets. When was the last time you spoke to him? Has he ever addressed a word to you? Does he even know you exist?”

Titus said nothing, heaving a sigh of irritation and then sinking into thought, as he turned a date over in his fingers.

“In any case,” Velia went on, increasingly caught up in her tale, “whether as a slave or a free man, Chrysogonus was there with a substantial crowd of Sullans. I thought we would be joining the banquet, but instead Corvus led me through the villa’s rear garden, without bothering to stop to chat to anyone there, not even pausing for a goblet. He was quite worked up. And this is the good part.” She took a sip of wine, leaving the story at that cliffhanger, like an old hand at drawing room gossip.

“Well?”

“Ah, so you *are* still with me, after all. I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t shoved off on one of your voyages. Well, in the rear of the villa there’s a little theater. You understand? An actual little theater, with a real stage of its own.”

“Mm-hmm... so, Euripides? Sophocles?” Titus asked. “Some boring performance by mimes? What brand of poison did he force you to swallow?” and he simulated an enormous yawn.

Velia laughed. “You silly country rube. Despite all my best efforts you’re still nothing but a good-for-nothing mercenary, a spear-bearer taking up the *pilum* in exchange for a crust of bread. Oh, luminous Apollo, what good have all my prayers done?”

Titus laughed, too. “Maybe Apollo had something else on his mind, and your prayers were forwarded to the ears of Venus. That’s what must have happened, because I can never get enough of what you have there in your lap.”

Wrapping both his arms around her, he slid her beneath him.

The matron seemed to give in momentarily to her lover’s lust, but nothing and no one could come between Velia and her stories.

“No mimes, and no masks: gladiators, Titus. Gladiators on a stage. Had such a thing ever been seen? They were made up like actors, rouged and wearing ridiculous silver helmets and wielding tiny shields. They performed the duel between Achilles and Hector. Can you imagine anything more grotesque? Animals from the gladiatorial arena staging a tragedy?”

Titus wasn’t so sure he found the idea as extraordinary as she seemed to, but above all he felt frustrated by the woman’s talkative vein, as she was clearly far more inclined to conversation at the moment than to sex.

“So, those two were battling fiercely on the stage while our man Corvus insisted that I devote some tender loving care to his desires, in short, he wanted me to take *his* situation in hand.”

“Right there, in front of everyone?”

“Right there, at the foot of the stage, while those two monsters were slashing each other’s throats; in fact, I still have a few drops of blood on my dress. You have to understand, my dear friend, that that’s how he gets his excitement.”

“So you’re saying that his senatorial rod gets stiff at the sight of death?”

“I don’t think it’s just death per se, it’s combat. As he told me himself, he’s convinced that there’s something sensual about the grunting efforts of men battling each other. Even the

evenings when he lingers here, in the intimacy of my house, without an audience or gladiators, when he mounts me, he demands that I recite the bloodiest passages of the *Iliad* for his enjoyment.”

“But you don’t even speak Greek.”

“Oh, yes, I do! Maybe not fluently, but much better than you do: I mean, when *you* try to speak it, you babble like a one-year-old toddler. In any case, Corvus isn’t any judge of it. I mean, with his Greek, he’d starve to death in Athens. Plus, another good thing, he’s a horseman who rides as fast as the wind, so all I have to do is recite a few inspired verses. But what he has to his credit, though, are exquisite manners and extraordinary taste when it comes to fabrics and jewelry for a lady.”

Once again, the room echoed to Velia’s enchanting laughter.

“Is there anyone, among your coterie of noble boyfriends, who still fucks the way that Romulus and Remus did?” Titus asked.

“There are a few, even among the worst debauchees. But even lovemaking, my animalistic little toy soldier, can just turn into a boring back-and-forth, if overdone.”

“As you know all too well...” Titus gave her a sly, knowing sidelong glance. Velia slapped him playfully. “Watch yourself, Titus Annius Tusculanus. I can find all the retired centurions willing to take care of me that I like or need, you know.”

The two of them went at it for a while, playing the way that lovers play. And they might even have rung down the sun and raised up the moon, if a slave hadn’t cautiously cleared his throat before venturing to step into the room.

“What is it, Agapios? You know that when the door is shut, your *domina* is not to be disturbed. What’s happening? Is the house afire?”

The slave, a reed-slender adolescent, kept his head bowed as he stammered out his message.

“I’m so sorry, *domina*. There’s a man at the door for Titus Annius.” Whereupon the boy turned to address the veteran. “A man who says his name is Fulvius Habilis: he’s here to take you to see Marcus Licinius Crassus. He says that it’s urgent.”

Velia moved away from her lover.

“Oh, no, so sorry, my love. Someone is yanking your reins.”

Titus sat up on the edge of the couch, shivering as he set his bare feet down on the cold terracotta floor.

“Looks like there are outstanding debts to be collected,” he muttered, and gestured for Agapios to toss him his tunic. “You see, Velia?” he added, with a sigh. “There are still people in Rome willing to pay me to go back to my rough old ways as a centurion.”

He got dressed, kissed the woman – who concealed her head under the blanket, purring like a cat – and before leaving halted in the doorway, as if he had forgotten something.

“If I may ask: the other evening, who won in the battle between Achilles and Hector?”

The woman thought it over for a moment, and then replied: “Hector.”

“Oh, well then, there is still someone out there who loves the unpredictability of a fair fight.”

He stepped out into the street. Crassus’s men were always in a hurry and Fulvius, just like his commander, had no interest in dallying.

A naked child was running across the marble, waving a wooden sword, while an elderly slavewoman struggled to keep up with him, waving a rag in one hand.

“Publius! Publius Licinius, you come here! It’s cold out. Come on, let’s go get you a bath, otherwise, if the *domina* sees you, it’ll be tears for the both of us.”

A chestnut-haired devil just five years old could easily prove to be a quick little animal impossible to catch, in the cramped confines of a Roman house, and who could say how much longer the chase would have gone on, had the little fugitive not fetched up against Titus’s legs. The centurion lifted the boy up over his head.

“And who would you be? You’re carrying a sword, so you must be a mighty warrior…”

“I am General Publius! And who are you?”

“Centurion Titus Annius Tusculanus, reporting for duty, general. What are your orders?”

“Put me down!” And the child hit Titus over the head with his small wooden sword.

“Hey!” Titus took the toy out of his hand. “General, if you start striking your own men, none of them will follow you into battle.”

“Give me back my sword!

“You have to earn the right to command men, didn’t your father ever tell you that?”

“My father told me that he’s going to buy a legion all for me.”

Titus gave the child back his sword, and in exchange he received a glare and a stuck-out tongue. “Well, you certainly know where you’re aiming to get,” he sighed, “but before you reach your moment of splendor, there’s always going to be someone eager to trip you up and then kick you while you’re down.” And he handed the tot over to the tender loving care of the out-of-breath slavewoman.

Publius started to shriek and kick his little legs, held tight in the arms of his caregiver.

“Will someone tell Titus Annius to come see me?” shouted a voice. That was Crassus.

Fulvius Habilis nodded to the former centurion.” He’s expecting you in the tablinum, you know the way.”

“Thanks very much, my sunny friend, Fulvius,” Titus replied.

The other man grunted something and vanished in the general direction of the kitchen. It was lunchtime.

Marcus Licinius Crassus was the owner of half of Rome. He, like many others, had taken capable advantage of the proscriptions, the lengthy enemies lists drawn up by Sulla and his closest collaborators in the immediate aftermath of the taking of the City, after their resounding defeat of the followers of Gaius Marius. Thousands of Romans had been sentenced to death with a brushstroke of red lead because they were considered opponents of the new order or supporters of Marius. Whoever had fallen into Sulla’s bad graces, anyone who constituted a potential stumbling block, and it mattered not whether patrician or plebeian, was slated for death; in the best of all possible outcomes, they would be exiled from the city. More than three thousand people had been lynched by the mob, and in some cases actually murdered by relatives. Anyone, once proscribed, could be killed without legal repercussions because simply appearing on that list meant you were officially an enemy of the Dictator, and therefore an enemy of Rome.

A great many citizens had seized the opportunity to settle accounts with political adversaries, or merely to put an end to personal disputes: all one needed to do to grease the wheels was whisper a name in the ear of those assigned to draw up the lists, along with an earnest promise of substantial payments. Anyone whose name wound up on the white tablets set out in the Rostra Forum was deprived not only of life and limb, but also of all their worldly

property, subsequently sold off at a pittance in auctions that were artfully piloted to the benefit of a favored few.

Crassus had won Sulla's gratitude during the civil war. Afterwards, with Sulla's tacit approval and his own considerable cunning and a vast purse of cash which he spent willingly, he had procured, at laughably low prices, dozens of buildings in the heart of Rome that had been confiscated from the Marians (followers of Marius, whether actual or alleged). Unlike so many others, however, he had not indulged in the giddy intoxication of sudden wealth, primarily because he was already accustomed to being a rich man. He had chosen to give greater substance and foundation to his fortune by transforming his holdings into wood, straw, clay, bricks, and marble. To Crassus, *insulae* and *villae*, city blocks and country mansions, appeared far more inviting than the glitter of gold that captivated the plebeians, or the boundless lands yearned after by patrician large landholders.

In Rome, he was thought of as a greedy miser and a cynic, tirelessly devoted to raking together astonishing sums of money, just for the sheer delight of perching atop those heaps of cash. Or so it seemed to the many, who simply couldn't wrap their heads around the idea of a wealthy man who was so austere in his lifestyle and so indifferent to the pleasures of the flesh. Even Velia considered him to be a miserly buzzard, who'd grown fat on the carrion of Roman carcasses abandoned to rot on the battlefields of the civil war. Titus, however, knew him well and understood that, beneath the mask of a miser there lurked a very dangerous individual, a man of boundless ambition. Crassus wasn't building a pharaonic fortune just for the sake of getting and owning, people misjudged him on that point: He was tending to his personal fortune, his assets, with the same brutal determination he brought to everything he did. When the right time came, he would transform that wealth into power.

Crassus's father and his brother had both been murdered by the followers of Marius, and so he had put his fortune and his own military skills at Sulla's disposal. During the starkly dramatic final act of the civil war, it had been none other than Crassus, with his troops, who had rescued the future dictator from defeat. And this had increased his influence exponentially.

Titus knew this very well because he'd been there at the time: he was a centurion and a recruiter who had just enlisted in Crassus's legions after spending the previous twenty years serving first in Marius's legions, and later in Sulla's. He was there when Marcus Licinius Crassus had launched his troops to the rescue of Sulla's left flank, actively and dangerously threatened by the advance of Marius's Samnite allies. A decisive attack, which had changed the outcome of the Battle of the Colline Gate.

Sulla had seen, right there on the battlefield, all the proof he needed of the kind of man Crassus was, and he was well aware that he almost certainly owed his life to that overambitious scion of a great Roman family. And yet he did not feel the same respect for Sulla as he did for other young men with bright and promising futures, such as, for instance, Pompey, as Gnaeus Pompeius Trogus was known. Everyone knew that Sulla did not dote on Crassus. But no one seemed to know why.

In any case, the Dictator knew how to show his gratitude to Marcus Licinius, whose wealth, at least, he certainly respected. Therefore, after conquering Rome and paying due homage for his victory to the goddess Fortuna, restoring her temple in Praeneste to its onetime magnificence, Sulla expressed his thanks for Crassus's quite earthly military skills with the every-bit-as-earthly landed estates of the losing side. While the goddess may have watched over Sulla's fate from on high, it was Marcus Licinius, instead, at least on that one specific occasion, who had saved his backside (though Sulla would never had admitted the fact).

Now, two years after that fateful battle at the gates of the City, Crassus had become the wealthiest landlord of all Rome, and Titus Annius Tusculanus had become a kept enforcer and a collector of debts in the Crassus's service. Marcus and Titus were about the same age and they perfectly represented the two faces of victory: the general sat at the victor's table, and the centurion swept up the crumbs that dropped to the floor.

Titus entered Crassus's study while the *dominus* was dictating his correspondence to a busily scribbling slave, pacing back and forth all the while. He did not dare to interrupt him.

"Therefore, O respected Polinus Servus, while greatly admiring your beautiful creations, I fail to see the merit in your explanations for the delay in delivery of the statues of Castor and Pollux that I had commissioned from you. I consider that..." Crassus noticed his guest standing motionless in the doorway. "Ah, Titus, here you are. Let me finish this letter, then I have a project to put before you. Clitius, what are you waiting for? Serve a goblet of hot wine to the great Tusculanus, war hero and patron demigod of the dicers and gamblers of the Suburra."

A young man who'd been waiting off to one side started at his master's command with the promptitude of a shepherd dog and poured the veteran a goblet of steaming wine. Scattered across the surface of the large marble table at the center of the study were contracts, lists, and spreadsheets, a sample of the suffocating bureaucracy that was becoming a symbol of Rome every bit as much as the bright red of its wartime insignia and standards.

Crassus resumed his dictation. "...I consider that... I consider what? Herodius, what penalty do you consider fitting and proper for Polinus's delay?"

Herodius, the scribe, replied after a moment's thought: "My lord, Polinus Servus works with marble from the quarries of Luni. He claims that the raw material he planned to work with

failed to arrive in time because of the wreck of the ship expected to dock at Ostia at the kalends of December. The ship in question was in fact lost at sea but, in contrast with what Servus claims, that was at least a week after the date scheduled for the delivery of the marble, while it was returning north from Sicily, with a cargo of olive oil.

“And you know this how, my trusted Herodius?”

“My lord, if my memory does not fail me, a couple of months ago we took delivery of a statue of Adonis from Portius Pisis, who works with the same marble as Polinus and who was expecting a shipment on the very same ship. Well, Portius was perfectly punctual. I deduce from that fact that Polinus Servus dreamed up his excuse with the expectation that you would be too busy to delve into it. What’s more, I know that he delivered a Castor and Pollux to Valerius Fabius two months late, so that the villa where the statue was meant to be installed had to be inaugurated without the nobleman Valerius being able to show off the masterpiece he had boasted about so frequently to his friends. Therefore, my lord, my humble opinion runs as follows: I believe that it is right and proper to pay Servus no more than eighty thousand sesterces for his work, exactly one half what we originally agreed. No lawyer and no judge will dream of questioning your decision.”

While the slave expressed his theory in impeccable Latin, musical and crystalline like that spoken by the denizens of the eastern precincts of the Empire, Crassus had stood motionless at the center of the room. Staring at the scroll-filled shelves of the *capsa*, he was nodding with a grave expression. Finally he smiled and clapped his hands.

“Very good, Herodius, we accept your counsel. Please complete the letter yourself. You know the drill: direct, precise, but not angry. Give that stone-vendor the clear sensation that our

decision is ineluctable and final.” Then he poured himself a goblet of wine and turned to his guest: “There you have it, Titus, what I consider to be a real bargain!”

“Well, you’ll be buying a sculpture by Polinus for half its market value. That’s not a small savings, especially considering how great the demand for his work has become.”

“Well, I was actually referring to Herodius. By all the gods, he’s worth at least twenty freedmen, Romans and otherwise!” and he laid a hand on the scribe’s shoulder.

Herodius bowed his head in appreciation of the sentiments.

“I don’t regret a single denarius I paid to win him. And it was a very tough slave auction.”

“As far as I know, Marcus Licinius, every enslaved architect, accountant, builder, or scribe worthy of the name that’s been auctioned off in markets of Rome has promptly been drafted into your ranks.”

“Yes, I leave the musicians, poets, and orators to the others. In all sincerity, my good Titus, I don’t see what they’re good for. Have you ever met a musician or a poet in the encampments of a legion?”

“Occasionally. Perhaps not ones suited to the household of a senator, but here and there, yes I have met them.”

Crassus looked him up and down and his mind seemed to wander somewhat. “Do you miss the war?”

“I miss the legion, which was my family for twenty years. The war itself, no, I don’t miss it.”

“Oh, don’t you lie to me. I know three types of legionnaires. Landless peasants, fugitives, and the ones who are born with a short sword in one hand and a helmet on their head: the real

soldiers. Now you, Titus, have no dirt under your fingernails and you never look nervously over your shoulder. Don't act sentimental with me, Mars is the only god at whose altar you worship."

Titus let the man talk, as he went on sipping his wine.

"It may be that skirmishes against the surviving Marian partisans, still smoldering along the borders of Rome's possessions and colonies, aren't to your taste," Crassus went on. "But another civil war could break out any day now; or else some reckless king of a faraway land will tread on the Republic's toes, and when that happens the army will be opening its doors to retired veterans like yourself."

"Who can say? But for the moment, General, I'm here in your office waiting to learn why you've asked me here today."

Crassus gestured for the slaves to leave the room. Herodius bade farewell with a servile bow.

"Of course, let's get down to business. How are things going with the dice? Has fortune finally smiled upon you?"

"I've given up throwing the dice entirely. They're too much trouble."

"A wise decision. Word is that you don't have much left, of your exit pay."

"And who says so, O noble Crassus?"

"I do. Back when I welcomed you into the cohorts of my legion, it was a well-known fact among the legionnaires, from the humblest mess cooks to the most exalted tribunes, that you had already diced and gambled away your share of the booty won while fighting under Sulla the Fortunate." He paused. He could tell that Titus had folded up into an embarrassed silence, but he didn't let up on his assault. "For that matter, if that hadn't been the case, why would you have agreed to become a debt-collector on my behalf?" Crassus gazed steadily at the man, in search of

a reaction. “This isn’t work befitting a former centurion. And then there’s another thing, my dear Titus, my brave, foolish Titus... Allowing yourself to be made a kept man, kept and maintained by a she-wolf ...” Crassus shook his head as if marveling over the mischief of a child, and then went to sit down on the chair behind his desk, pouring himself a glass of wine and inviting his guest to fill his goblet again.

Titus wasn’t the type to let anyone speak so freely and lightly about him, much less about Velia, but a single wave of the hand from the person sitting across the desk from him, behind that mountain of stacked paper, was worth as much as not only his life but his woman’s life as well; in the presence of such sheer concentrated power, he had no choice but to submit.

“No one can hide a thing from your eyes, Marcus Licinius. I thought I had operated with caution and prudence. That I had avoided offering fodder for rumors or gossip. But if Fulvius was able to track me down so easily ... How did you manage to find out about Velia Aquinia?”

The other man laughed, slapping his thighs. He looked like the cat that ate the canary. “I own half the residential buildings in this city. There is no hill, no street upon which at least someone doesn’t owe it to Crassus if they have a roof over their head, and that makes me a very well-informed person indeed about everything that happens everywhere.”

Titus nodded.

“I know a lot about you,” the master of the house went on, pouring wine for the two of them even as he spoke. “Just think, I even know what lies in your future.”

“Oh, you do? And what would that be?”

Crassus stood up and crooked his arm in Titus’s, leading him out into the garden. The two men walked along in light tunics; the chill stung their legs.

“Here’s what I see in your future, Titus: a return to the Suburra. You’re still in touch with the prison-scrappings that lurk in those reeking alleys, aren’t you?”

“Truth be told, Crassus, it’s been quite some time since I last spent much time in those *popinae* and brothels.”

“Oh, I get it. Velia has spruced you up. I’m told that these days you even go to the performances of mimes. A lovely metamorphosis, no doubt about it. But trust me, it doesn’t suit you. The garish togas don’t suit you, the silver goblets don’t suit you. A wild boar, at a banquet, could at least play the part of the main dish, whereas you in that setting…”

Titus said nothing. After all, Crassus was speaking the unalloyed truth. Velia’s dream of transforming him into a perfect denizen of theaters, arenas, and dinner parties was likely to remain nothing more than just that: a dream.

“All right, all right. That’s enough idle chitchat,” said Crassus. He stopped and seemed to stand there for a moment studying his surroundings, ears pricked up: the gurgling of a foundation decorated with cupids, the tap-tap-tapping of a robin’s beak, a blackbird’s whistle. His tone of voice grew confidential.

“Last night, in one of Halfpenny’s brothels, which occupies one of my buildings in the Vicus Esquilinus, a man was murdered, someone that mattered to me. His name was Marcus Villius Cincius. Did you know him?”

“Not as well as I know Halfpenny, but the name isn’t new to me. An actor mentioned the name to me while boasting about his Chian toga: was this man a fabric merchant?”

“That’s exactly what he was. No one else of any importance bears this surname. So then, what do you know about him?”

“Very little. That he’s a member of the equestrian order, that he buys fabrics from the east, and that he owns a couple of warehouses in Ostia. To judge from the fact that on the Palatine Hill his name is uttered in connection with the togas worn by magistrates and senators, he must be quite wealthy. That’s all I can offer.”

“He was, in fact, a wealthy man, yes. But what interested me is that he had decided to take an active role in politics. I’m not going to go into detail, but if the gods had allowed him a longer life on earth, he could have given me considerable help in my business dealings by becoming, first, a quaestor and later a senator. I had in fact just recently bestowed upon the good Cincius no less than three thousand jugera of prime farmland just outside of Cumae: vineyards, producing more than a million sesterces a year, enough to win a place in the senatorial curia. He would have had a good shot at making it into the Senate, even if Sulla hadn’t abolished the censors. Certainly, he might never have become a front-bencher... but every extra vote counts.”

“*Vixit*. He lived and he died. But what do I have to do with such a distinguished Roman?”

“Be patient, centurion, we’re getting to that. There’s something unsettling about Cincius’s death, however. something strange. In order to kill him, the killers broke into a brothel and they didn’t think twice about massacring three she-wolves and a Greek pilgrim who were keeping company with our unfortunate Marcus Villius.”

Titus didn’t seem particularly impressed. “Well, worse things than that happen all the time, in Suburra. The other night I was told that a man and his six children were stabbed to death for a few copper pennies and some sandals. So I can hardly say that the murder of three whores and an effete Greek necessarily constitutes a shocking development.”

“It’s true, there’s no limit to the ferocity that takes root in Rome’s darkest alleys,” Crassus commented. “But these killers... These killers also eliminated a security detail of five

armed men. Have you heard anything about the jackals of the Suburra having grown into full-fledged lions?”

The former centurion shrugged.

“A genuine bloodbath. Fulvius Habilis visited the scene of the crime. The Sheathed Sword.”

“I’ve heard of the place. People say it’s the fanciest bordello in all of the Suburra. Halfpenny is looking to step up. I didn’t think it had opened yet...”

“You’re right, in fact. It hadn’t yet been inaugurated. But this was a private party. Cincius had rented the place out for himself and this Greek pilgrim who’d arrived in the city a few months ago. Heliconis Atticus was his name. It appears that people called him Little Alexander, because he resembled depictions of Alexander the Great. He had a notable blonde mane and one brown eye and one blue eye, just like the great Macedonian king.”

Titus whistled. “They must have paid handsomely for that party. It’s not every day that Halfpenny extends that sort of favor. Someone must have blabbed, I’ll bet there was a bag of cash involved, enough to tempt plenty of Suburra crooks.”

“No sign of cash on the site. Not even a jewel. Nothing but blood.”

“Exactly.”

“I know,” Crassus continued, “it’s only natural to think of it as a robbery, and looking for the roots of every evil act in gold and personal gain is rarely a mistake. All the same, something doesn’t add up here. As far as I can determine, there is one survivor of the massacre: Halfpenny was with Cincius and the others when they were killed, but we’ve lost all traces of that little bastard. After the bloodbath, he vanished into thin air.”

Titus Annius burst into laughter. “No, not really? Halfpenny? Marcus Garrulus, AKA Halfpenny? Crassus, are you joking? You know him as well as I do, and if he didn’t practice the profession that he does, I would have sworn that he was one of your clientele. He’s been paying you rent on his brothels for years now. Halfpenny has no balls, he’s a coward, and he’s definitely quite shrewd: he hardly fits the profile of someone who’d murder an aspiring magistrate and future senator. And for what gain? He was going to pocket the cash anyway, in payment of his services. And the jewelry? How much jewelry could Cincius and the Greek even have had on their persons?”

“Would I have asked you here in the first place if I’d only come to such clumsy and ill-assorted conclusions? It’s obvious that Halfpenny would never have staged such a spectacular slaughter for a few gold-plated trinkets,” Crassus made clear. “But the fact is that he’s vanished. Fulvius has questioned Halfpenny’s people and he’s been unable to get an ounce of useful information out of them. The man isn’t at any of his brothels and he’s not at his home. But he *was* at the Sheathed Sword and he survived, the only one of the six people present. You’ll agree that the setup is suspicious at best.”

“Wouldn’t you have taken to your heels if you were a notorious pimp and con artist and you had been an eyewitness to the murder of a prominent Roman?”

“Yes, of course. But the truth is, Titus, I have good reason to believe that the little bastard actually devised this ambush. Or maybe I should say: my instincts tell me that Halfpenny has something to do with this, though he couldn’t have come up with the whole thing on his own. Why did he organize this orgy? Halfpenny didn’t even know this Cincius, and to the best of my knowledge Cincius was no habitu  of brothels and *popinae*. Though by now it’s clear, the man

had wicked habits sufficiently reprehensible to ensure he took great care to keep them confidential.

Titus turned thoughtful.

“So what is there to find about Cincius that I don’t know yet?” he wondered aloud.

“Come on, now, there must be something lurking in the life of that Roman, if you’re so convinced that his death couldn’t have been something as vulgar and commonplace as a murder for robbery at the hands of just some unremarkable Suburran.”

Crassus smiled nonchalantly, leaving the former centurion’s curiosity unslaked.

“All right,” Titus said, as he scratched his beard. “All right, then,” he said again, almost as if trying to talk himself into it, “what do you want me to do?”

“Excellent. Here is the opportunity that I tore you out of your woman’s bed to offer you,” Crassus announced. “Find Halfpenny and bring him here. Whether or not he wants to come along quietly. Wade back into the Suburra for a few days and get some shit on your hands, but bring me that bastard, and then you can go back to pretending you’re excited about mimes and mosaics.”

“You, who know all and see all, are asking me to find someone for you in the Suburra?”

“You know that I’m not popular there, and my men are even less so. I’ve put a roof over the heads many of those penniless stinkers, I’ve probably evicted even more of them, and the vast majority live under roofs of mine that are threatening to crash in on their heads from one minute to the next. Proper maintenance of low-rent real estate is the very least of my concerns. You’ve worked for me, but I’ve never sent you to collect debts in the *insulae*; there you’re known only as Titus Annius, the veteran who loves dice more than women. What’s more, there is no one among my men with your acute intelligence. Most important of all, I trust you. You’re

a soldier, and this is not just an ordinary routine task that I can entrust to some brute without a crumb of honor to his name. No one in Rome is immune to corruption. Every now and then I worry that even little Publius, in exchange for a wooden toy horse, might stab me in my sleep. I trust no one but you, drinker and gambler that you are, but also a magnificent warrior and, for the right price, a man of ironbound loyalty.”

“Exactly, for the right price. If this is no ordinary job, then I expect to receive suitable payment for my work.”

“And so you shall, Titus. A thousand sesterces now, to cover your expenses, and ten thousand more once you’ve brought me Halfpenny.” Crassus stopped and looked down at his thigh-strapped sandals, then slowly exhaled. “Cincius was important to me.”

A sudden chill seemed to fill the air.

“Important just to you, Marcus Licinius? I don’t mean to make things awkward, but I hope you don’t mind my asking you this, at least: Who am I actually going to be working for?” Titus asked suspiciously.

Crassus put on an astonished face. “Do you see anyone else around here? It’s just me and you. It’s me who’s hiring, me who’s paying you, and you who are reporting back to me. If you’re alluding to any involvement on Sulla’s part in this affair... The Dictator and I are, how to put this, distant these days, and have been for some time. And he has other things on his mind right now. He’s supervising the last stages of the siege of Volterra, the city seems to be on the brink of surrender; after two full years of foolish resistance, those bastards deserve all his loving attention. The news of Cincius’s murder probably hasn’t even reached his ears, that is, if it even would interest him.”

“You say he’s still in Volterra... That’s odd, I thought he’d come back to the city,” said the centurion, letting the phrase drop into the January chill.

“What makes you think that? Do you think he’s likely to tiptoe back into Rome without telling anyone?” Crassus demanded.

“Someone I know claims that they saw Chrysogonus at a party in a villa outside of town. They must have been mistaken.”

“Oh, no, whoever that might have been saw quite clearly. The faithful dog is in Rome, but without his master.”

“And why would that be?”

Crassus winked at him. “Apparently Chrysogonus has some urgent matter to take care of in the city, because his men have been paying calls on all the most prominent litigators and criminal lawyers of the forum. That effete Greek bastard... From long habit of working alongside the Sun he has convinced himself that he’s Apollo, whereas at the most he’s Icarus. And very possibly someone’s about to burn his little wings.”

Titus wasn’t certain that he’d understood, but he didn’t allow himself to be distracted by a sideshow that didn’t concern him and about which, when all was said and done, he cared little if anything.

“I accept the assignment. I’ll report to you and no one else,” he said.

“Excellent, very good indeed,” Crassus said, expelling a plume of dense steaming breath into the chilly air and the pale sunlight. He seemed satisfied, and almost relieved. “Come, let’s go collect the thousand sesterces of your expenses. Do you want Fulvius Habilis to see you home? Even if it’s just an advance, it’s still a tidy sum and it will clank in your purse.”

A sly smile appeared on the veteran’s face. “I feel safer alone. Thanks anyway.”

Crassus smiled back.

“Poor Fulvius. Minerva certainly failed to bless him with a brilliant intellect, but he’s a skilled sellsword.”

“And how many skilled sellswords have we seen die, Crassus?”

The wealthy profiteer turned back into a soldier for a moment, and after handing over the pouch of silver coins, he grasped Titus by the forearm, bidding him farewell in the manner of fellow combatants.

“Don’t forget: I need Halfpenny alive.”

Titus nodded.

Fulvius was snoring, wrapped in a cape. He had fallen asleep on a bench in the *vestibulum*, and a cat was picking over the remains of his meal in a bowl lying forgotten at his feet. Titus gave the bench a little kick and Fulvius woke up on the floor; the cat shot out of the room.

“May Hecate make you die painfully, Tusculanus. What the hell were you thinking?”

“The Marians are coming, Fulvius, the Marians are coming!” the former centurion cried, and laughing as he went, left the home of Marcus Licinius Crassus. He was in a damned jolly mood.