

NERO



*8 June, depth of night
The Praetorian camp, Rome*

My interrogation resumes with a splash of water. It's poured onto the top of my head with slow, malicious ease, and a cascade of icy murk soaks my hair and slides over my face and the back of my neck; a quiver runs down my spine. My head snaps back and I suck in one long, panicked gasp. I try to move, but rope still holds me to the chair, concentric circles wrapped from my chest down to my belly.

I open my eyes. Standing in front of me is a soldier, one of my Praetorians, holding an empty bucket.

'Up now!' he says. 'Up, up, up.'

Grudgingly, my wits return. Cuts and swollen bruises pepper my body, and with each breath a sharp pain shoots through my ribs like an arrow.

The soldier tosses the bucket aside. His silver cuirass catches the fire-light and shines the colour of Spanish gold.

He steps forward, places his hands on the arms of my chair, and leans in, until our noses are only inches apart. I unwillingly breathe in the stink of cheap, sour wine. He lingers, staring into my eyes . . . Fear. That's what he's after, any trace he can scavenge. But I won't let him have it. I refuse to be afraid of a mere soldier. It's undignified: as far beneath me as it should be beyond him.

This one, though – this one has it in for me.

Earlier, before I lost consciousness, still tied to the chair, he asked if I remembered him. He genuinely believed that I should know him personally from the hundreds of thousands of soldiers at my beck and call. He described a night – years ago – when I made him serve a dinner party dressed as Venus. On my orders, he was forced to wear a silk stola, wig, and make-up, and sent marching amongst tables of guests. He's only known as Venus now – or so he says. The rank and file, the

officers, even the prefects – no one remembers his real name. He was red in the face when he told me, a girlish quiver to every word. Who knew that a Roman soldier could be so sensitive? What's a bit of eye-shadow compared to a German horde?

I, of course, remembered none of it. After I told him as much, that I didn't recall him or that night, but it sounded like quite the party; he beat me viciously. I'm not sure he would have stopped if the centurion hadn't told him to. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness is the soldier, my erstwhile Venus, panting like a dog after his outburst.

Thankfully, before he can lay his calloused hands on me again, the centurion calls out to him. He gives me a knowing wink before joining his superior by the fire.

We are in a dark, cavernous room the gods above know where. The only light is from a fire burning to my left. The bricks beyond – interlocking stones of black volcanic rock – seem to move with the flicker of the flames.

I count three soldiers, the same three who dragged me from my bed hours before. I watch them pass around a skin of wine. Each man takes a long, deep swig. I could use a drink myself. When I tell them as much, one soldier laughs while the other two, Venus and the centurion, ignore me.

The centurion's helmet is off revealing a sweaty mat of ginger. I doubt he's of Italian stock. Likely he's from Gaul, near the Rhine, where such a look is common. I find this comforting somehow, his treachery easier to understand. You can never trust a non-Italian. Their hearts are never truly in it.

The soldiers continue to talk. I watch the flames of the fire to pass the time.

Their voices are getting louder the more they drink. They're sharing their theories on me, debating how best to capitalise on my value. One of them refers to treasure buried in the shores of Carthage. 'He knows where it is,' he says. 'He knows.' (Why do the rabble always think Caesar buries his treasure rather than spend it?) Another thinks there's gold in my veins, flakes of it floating in my blood, like leaves on a pond. He wants to cut and drain me like a pig, and boil down what

he collects, leaving only the ore. ‘The Greeks did it to Priam,’ he says, ‘and he’s richer than Priam.’

I take a deep breath. Wait. Their time will come. Many remain loyal: soldiers, courtiers, senators, the poor in the streets. Despite the recent unrest in the provinces, despite one or two legions acting out like petulant children, the majority love me still. Someone will come. Someone will stop this. And when they do . . . These three will have to be punished. There’s no avoiding that now. Their execution will have to be public – public and somewhat gruesome. I’m not a monster, but precedent will need to be set. This can never happen again. Granted, I will promise one of them – just the one – a quick death in exchange for the names of the men who betrayed me. But that is a minor cost well worth the return. When it’s all over – after they’re crucified, bled and their grey, stiff bodies are left for the crows – balance will be restored. Then I’ll drink, fuck and go to the races. The Greens are due for a win after all – the Greens and me both.

The soldiers finally finish their discussion. Whatever deal they’ve struck, it’s commemorated with a handshake and more wine. The skin is passed around one final time. Venus guzzles his fill and then wipes his mouth dry. He watches me as he does it, as he slides his hand across his face.

I breathe deeply, willing my heartbeat to slow.

Venus goes to the fire and removes from the flames a long, thin dagger. The blade glows a translucent yellow-orange in the gloom. Steam whispers off the steel. He holds the weapon above his head and turns it from side to side, inspecting the blade. All of my effort to remain resilient vanishes. Fear overwhelms me. I feel it in the pit of my stomach, an empty expanse that grows and presses on my bladder until warm piss trickles down my leg.

Venus walks towards me. He’s smiling again, his rotting teeth illuminated by the glowing blade. I grow frantic, writhing uselessly against my bonds. I call out to the redheaded centurion. I offer him coin, titles, even a distant niece’s hand in marriage. I offer him Cyprus and mean it. The centurion just stands there, watching. His only response is a shrug.

MARCUS



10 June, afternoon
City jail IV, Rome

I climb the stairs without stopping once. The sound of feet sliding on dusty brick – *scrip-scrape, scrip-scrape, scrip-scrape* – fills the whole stairwell. When this happened before, I'd worry someone was following me. Every few steps I'd stop and look behind me, but the sound would stop as well and there wouldn't be anyone there. It took me ages to get to the top. Last winter I told Elsie. She said it was a ghost, but there were ways to make sure it wouldn't bother me. She boiled bits of python in wine – its guts and skin and even its *eyes!* – for one day and two nights. Then, when it was a sticky, black paste, she rubbed it on my chest each morning until it was finished. It itched and the smell made my nose tingle. But it worked. I can still hear the ghost when I climb the stairs, but it never bothers me. So now I can go all the way without stopping.

When I reach the top of the steps, I lean against the big, heavy door until it slowly swings open with an old *creeeak*. Inside his cell, the prisoner is curled up in a ball, snoring. I move quietly, hoping the freedman won't wake up until after I'm gone. But when I shut the door and the latch *clicks*, he wakes up.

'Morning, pup,' he says. His voice is fuzzy with sleep. He stretches, then props himself up on an elbow. 'What've you brought me today?'

I walk to his cell, kneel, and pull out from my basket a loaf of bread.

'Bread,' he says. 'Surprise, surprise.' He sits up. Sticks of hay slither and crunch. 'You're trying to poison me, aren't you? Feeding me that stale shit.'

He points his chin at the roof and scratches his neck. He didn't have a beard before but now he does. There's a scar on his cheek where the hair doesn't grow. It looks like a chubby, pink leech.

I push the loaf through the bars and hold it there.

He gets on his knees, then his feet. He's short – nearly as short as me. But he's as wide as an ox, so he moves like one, with big swishing steps. He lumbers over.

'Did you do as I asked?'

I'm not supposed to talk to prisoners. I've never once spoken to him, but every day he talks and talks and talks, asking me to carry messages for him. It makes me nervous. Elsie says to ignore him and finish my chores, so that's what I do.

'Well?' He stares at me with little green eyes. I aim mine at the bricks. When he sees I won't look him in the eye, he says, 'Whelp.' He says it quietly, but angry all the same. He takes the bread. Then, with his free hand, he points at my bare arm, which is purple with bruises. 'Loyalty,' he says, 'to a master who does that is misplaced, boy.'

Outside, a cow's bell clatters. *Clack clack clack.*

He walks back to his bed of hay, sits, and leans against the wall. He says, 'Come on, boy. Show some backbone, some initiative.' He rips off a piece of bread with his teeth and starts chewing. Little white pieces fall out of his mouth as he talks. 'You're a young pup, I know, scared of your master. Your little balls shrink at the thought of him. But you'll never change your lot in life following the rules. I was a slave once too, you know. I've told you who I am, haven't I? Galba's freedman. Icelus.' He points his chin at the roof and a bulge slides down his throat. He rips off another mouthful. '*The Icelus*. The city must be talking about me by now.'

Every day he says this; every day he tells me his name expecting me to know who he is. I've heard of Galba – the whole city is talking about the Hunchback raising an army in Spain – but I've never heard of an 'Icelus'. Anyway, even if I *had* heard of him, there's nothing I could do.

He says, 'I'm no thief or murderer, you know – at least, that's not why I'm here. I'm a political prisoner. A partisan. Do you know what that means?'

I fill a cup with water from the bucket against the far wall and carry it back to his cell.

'It means I made a bet. I bet on a man, that things would turn out in a certain way. If I lose . . .'

He stands up with a grunt and walks to the edge of his cell.

‘If I lose, I’m dead. Or it’s off to the mines. But if I’m *right*? Well, cunts and coin is what I used to call it, my ambition in life –’ he winks ‘– until Master Galba taught me to speak with more class . . .’

He grabs the cup and pulls it through the bars.

‘I’ve been here for, I think, twenty-two days. You see me locked up, destitute, and alone. You probably think I’m bugged. But the mere fact that I’m alive means something. My party cannot be doing all that badly. Now, say the man I’ve backed loses and I’m left to rot or, the gods forbid, killed. Do you know what will happen to you if you send one tiny, insignificant message for me? Nothing. No one will ever know. On the other hand, say I’m released . . . if I’m released, who knows what I can do for you. You can come and work for me if you’d like. And maybe, after a few years of faithful service, I set you free. I mean, look at me . . .’

He points at himself with the hand holding the cup; water sloshes out over the rim.

‘I was a slave once. But I’m a freedman now. To a Sulpicii no less. And believe me: I didn’t get here by being loyal. Do you think Galba was my first patron? Uh, uh. I moved on when the opportunity presented itself.’ He finishes the cup off in one swift slug. ‘You need to think about this, boy. Your life could change with only a little cunning.’

He stares at me, waiting. What does he want me to say?

I wait a moment and then point at his pisspot. Icelus turns to see what I’m pointing at. Then he sighs and his shoulders slouch. ‘Empty,’ he says. ‘Nothing to be done there. But –’

He’s cut off by the sound of horses outside.

‘Expecting anyone?’ he asks.

I shake my head. No.

I go to the window and grab two rusty bars and, standing on my tiptoes, look out over the ledge. Across the valley, I can see the city, hills of white stone, red-tiled roofs and shinning white marble. From here it looks quiet, but I know it’s never quiet.

‘What do you see, boy?’ Icelus says.

I look down below and see two black horses tied to a post. I can’t see who rode them.

And then we hear the door downstairs open with a heavy *bang*, followed by the jangle of metal and the stomping of feet. The noise gets closer and closer, and louder and louder, but then it stops, and all we hear is their breathing, long wheezes back and forth on the other side of the door.

Icelus backs away from the bars. He whispers, 'Do me a favour, pup. Forget I told you my name. OK?'

The door shakes as somebody wallops it three times from the other side. *WHACK WHACK WHACK*. I want to hide but there's nowhere to go. So I just stand there, shaking like the door.

Why don't they knock, whoever it is? Why not holler 'open up' instead of breaking down the door?

The fourth *WHACK* is the hardest. Wood cracks and the door flies open. Two soldiers rush in – shiny breastplates, wobbly helmets, swords bouncing at their hip – dragging a man by the arms. They pull him into one of the empty cells and then drop him. They don't say anything, they just drop him to the hard, brick floor.

'Boy –'

A third soldier walks in. He has to dip his head so the top of his helmet – the hairy bit that looks like a peacock's bum – doesn't catch on the door's arch.

'Boy –' he says again.

I don't move. My legs feel heavy and I'm shaking.

The soldier by the door takes off his helmet and holds it against his hip. His hair is orange and sticky with sweat, and his eyes are small and black. He looks like a fox.

To me, he asks, 'Do you work here?'

I nod.

'Where's the key? Fetch me the key. Now.'

I move quickly, happy to get away. I walk past the other two soldiers, who are still standing in the cell over the man they dragged in. One of them hiccups. They have the same look in their eyes that Master Creon gets when he drinks too much: lazy eyes; eyes that can't see you even when you're standing right in front of him.

I grab the ring of keys hanging from a hook on the wall. I bring it to the Fox. He takes the keys and tells the soldiers to get out of the cell.

He shuts the door behind them. The new prisoner is face down on the bricks. He hasn't moved. His tunic – purple and hemmed in gold – is filthy and torn. The Fox starts trying the keys in the lock and picks the right one on his second try.

To me, he asks, 'What are your duties here?'

I try to answer but inside my chest bunches up into tight little knots and my voice dies in the back of my throat. I'm ashamed of this, which makes it even harder to answer. I can only spit out one word at a time. 'Bread,' I say. 'Water.'

'Anything else?'

I point at Icelus's pisspot. 'Toilet.'

'And your master? Does he come here?'

I shake my head. No.

'Good. Very good,' the Fox says. 'All right, boy, listen to me very carefully. Do you see this man?' He points at the prisoner. 'This man is an enemy of the state, an enemy of Rome. He is dangerous. While he is a prisoner here, you must be wary of him. He will try to fill your head with stories. He will tell you that he is rich and powerful, and that he can reward those that help. He may even tell you that he is Caesar. This is a *lie*. He is nothing more than a common criminal. While he remains here, he receives no special treatment. Nothing. Understand?'

I don't know what to say. This day is very strange and I just want it to be over.

'Understand?' the Fox asks again.

I try to say something, but the words don't come. I clam up like I always do. I take too long and the Fox becomes angry. He takes a step toward me. I try to step back, but trip on my own feet and fall to the floor. My bum hits the bricks and a lightning bolt of pain shoots up my back.

The soldiers laugh. One of them hiccups again.

'This one is brave, isn't he?' the Fox says to the soldiers. 'A young Achilles.'

I sit up.

The Fox is serious again. 'Do you understand me, boy? The prisoner receives the same treatment as any other. I don't need to tell you what will happen if you disobey me, do I?'

I shake my head. No.

‘Good,’ the Fox says. Then, for the first time, he turns to look at the other cell. Inside, Icelus is cowering against the back wall, with his head buried into his arms and knees.

The Fox says, ‘You are the Hunchback’s freedman?’

Icelus peeks his head out. He looks at the Fox, then at the other two soldiers. ‘I . . . am.’

‘Your master is no longer a usurper. I have a message I wish for you to deliver to him.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then I cut your throat.’

Icelus looks up at the roof, like he’s thinking. Then he stands up and pats the dust off his thighs. He smiles. ‘Well, I suppose I should accept then.’

The Fox waves his hand and one of the soldiers unlocks Icelus’s cell. The rusty hinges *screech* as the door swings open. Icelus steps out and says to the Fox, ‘Where to?’

The Fox ignores him. To one soldier, he says, ‘Stay on the door by the road until I have you relieved. Save for the boy –’ he points at me ‘– no one enters without my say-so.’ Then to Icelus, he says, ‘We will send you to your patron. But first the prefect desires a word.’

They walk to the door. Icelus is smiling. He winks as he walks past me.

The Fox is the last to leave. He pauses at the door, turns back, and says, ‘Nero, I will see you again soon enough. May the gods take pity on you for all of your crimes.’

With that, the Fox walks out, leaving me alone with the new prisoner.

I stare at him for ages. He’s in the same spot where the soldiers dropped him, face down, his arms spread wide. I don’t think he’s moved. Is he dead?

I didn’t ask the question out loud but he answers it anyway: he moans. Then he starts to move, wiggling slowly, like a worm. He raises his head, showing me his face. A rag – sopping wet and stained a purply-brown – covers his eyes and a thick line of dark red stains each cheek. It looks like he’s been crying tears of blood.

I bend over and start spitting out my breakfast. A puddle of retch collects on the bricks.

‘Water,’ the prisoner says. He rolls over on to his back. ‘Water.’

I feel better after retching. I’m still scared, but I begin to feel sorry for him. I’ve never seen anyone this bad before. Prisoners always come with cuts and bruises, but never anything like this. Can I bring him water? The Fox said not to give any special treatment, but water isn’t special. Everyone gets water.

I go to the cell door and stick two fingers into the keyhole. I feel the latch I’m looking for and flip it up. *Click*. Then, with a tug, the door swings open. The rusty hinges *screeeech*. Once the door is open, I fill a cup with water and bring it back to the cell. I kneel beside the prisoner and I’m about to speak when I suddenly realise that I don’t know what to call him. The Fox said he’s a liar and a criminal. But then he called him . . . he called him the most famous name in the world. But it can’t be him. It can’t be the man Master and Mistress pray to every night and worship like a god. He wouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t look like this. Would he?

‘I . . . I have water.’

The prisoner’s head darts around, trying to see who is talking. I put my hand on his shoulder, letting him know it will be OK. With one hand, I hold the back of his head. With the other, I bring the cup to his lips. Propping himself up on his elbow, he puts his free hand on the cup. Together we tip the cup and water pours into his mouth. He drinks all of it, every last drop. He’s out of breath when he’s done.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

I help drag him to his bed, which is just a pile of hay in the corner. He sits, pressing his back against the wall. He gestures for more water. I fill the cup and sit down beside him. He puts his hands on the cup and we raise it to his lips. He takes a sip.

I stare at his face. Under the bloody rag, he has bruises, big and dark and purple, and his beard is sticky with syrupy blood, so red it’s almost black. I think again of the name the Fox gave him. Is this really him? On the other side of the circus, there’s a lake. Caesar’s lake. Beside it, there’s a statue as tall as a giant. It’s supposed to be the Sun God, but everyone says it looks like the Emperor. Like Nero. I look closely at the prisoner’s beat-up face and coppery beard. I try to match his face to the statue. But I can’t. There’s too much blood, too many bruises.

He asks, 'What's your name?'

'Marcus.'

'You are a slave?'

'Yes.'

He nods.

'You are . . . Caesar?'

'Yes.'

The prisoner tries to lie down but he can't do it himself, so I grab his shoulders and help him down on to the hay.

He says, 'Thank you, Marcus. You are a kind boy.'

He doesn't say another word. He just curls up on his new bed of hay and falls asleep.





II

A Hand in the Forum

A.D. 79

Eleven years later . . .





TITUS



*9 January, cockcrow
The Imperial palace, Rome*

Ptolemy whispers in my ear, ‘Titus,’ and I open my eyes.

It’s too early yet for the sun, so a lamp is in the boy’s hand. Amber light dithers along marble columns; drapes of Tyrian purple look an empty, bottomless black. I always forget how winter does this: paralyse the night until it bleeds into the day.

Once I pull back my sheet and sit up, the room comes alive. Slaves materialise out of thin air, drawing back curtains, beating dust from a rug of hide; braziers are lit. One stands ready with my belt. Another clutches the wool cloak I wear most mornings at my desk, as I read and attend to state business.

On campaign, I had two slaves, maybe three, attending to my needs. I grew used to such conservatism. I’ve tried to apply these values to my life here in the capital, amid the extravagance. It hasn’t worked. I often find myself sending slaves away to other parts of the palace, to my sisters or brother, to my father, or even my daughter who the gods know has more than enough hands waiting on her. Yet they always return – they or others like them. The one holding my belt is new, I think. She’s young, with chestnut hair, and thick eyebrows that meet above her nose.

I take breakfast in my study, as I review the letters and official dispatches that arrived during the night. The governor of Mauretania calls the province a backwater. He would like to return to Rome before his term is up. Would I put in a good word with the Emperor? (No, likely not.) In Asia, measures were taken to suppress a cult, one of the newer superstitions from the east. The proconsul believes the followers of Christus are particularly seditious. (Aren’t they all?) Cerialis writes from Thrace. The letter is more than two weeks old, which means the winds were poor or our Imperial service continues its

decline. Tomorrow, Cerialis will finally move against the latest False Nero and his army. (Father will be pleased. We've let that wound fester far too long.) The eunuch Halotus writes again to request a meeting. He claims I summoned him to Rome and he would like to know why. I don't recall making such a request, but I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain. I have better ways to spend my days than with Nero's chief poisoner. I write on the letter itself 'no' and instruct Ptolemy to personally deliver it to the eunuch. The astrologer Balbilus writes to say that a comet was possibly observed the night before last. This is Balbilus's third inauspicious report in a month. He and I will have to talk.

'Is that all?' I ask Ptolemy.

'One more, sire,' the boy says. He walks towards me, unrolling the letter. 'It only just arrived.'

'Who from?'

He reads: 'Lucius Plautius. He is in Italy.'

Strange. I didn't know Plautius was in Italy. Father had granted him a respectable post in Syria, a favour to his demanding aunt. Has his term ended already? I put out my hand. I've time yet before the ceremony begins.

5 January (from Baiae)

Dear Titus Flavius Vespasianus (prefect of the Praetorian Guard):

I should start with the good news: I am in Italy. I'd meant to keep this a secret. After all my years away, toiling in the east, sweating under the desert sun, rubbing elbows with barbarians – tamed barbarians, but barbarians nonetheless – I'd yearned to sneak back to the capital unannounced and surprise those I hold dear. I'd hoped to see the look of joy form spontaneously as I walked into so-and-so's atrium one evening. But I have bad news as well – information that concerns the Emperor – so I have spoiled the surprise. I will explain all of this in a moment. First, however, I hope you will permit me a few cathartic words on the state of the Empire.

I had expected to feel a shift once I'd returned to Italy; a sense of morality, something tangible I could feel growing in the soil or floating in the air.

I'd looked forward to this more than Italian wine, or its temperate sun, or its tart, mouth-watering lemons. Civilisation was what I was truly homesick for. However, since touching my foot to Miscenum's cement pier, I've bore witness to such debauchery and vice that I feel as though I've entered a Greek port, brimming with unruly sailors and pirates and whores, rather than the jewel of the Empire, a mere day's ride from the capital.

How did we Romans let the Bay of Naples descend into an endless brothel and bottomless cup of wine? What would our noble ancestors say if they could visit Baiae today? What would noble Brutus, the man who banished kings and established a republic – what would he say at the sight of a senator in the arms of an Alexandrian courtesan, with her black eyes and artificial charms, while his wife and the mother of his children is miles away in Rome? What would dear Cincinnatus, the man who declined the ultimate power of the dictatorship because he preferred the country life, working his plough and tilling the dark Italian earth that he loved so much – what would he say at the sight of his descendants betting their ancestral homes on the roll of a single die, and then shrugging at an ill-fated toss because there is always more credit to be had?

And yet I know the extreme does not mark the whole. I look forward to my return to Rome. I know there are good, moral men in the capital; men who will help guide our Empire back towards the noble, wholesome values that made Rome mistress of the world. You, my dear Titus, are one of whom I speak. I often hear of the good you do every day in Caesar's name. If you occasionally apply a strong hand, I know circumstances require it. Rome cannot fall back into another civil war. The months that followed Nero's suicide were dark and destructive. Eighteen months of civil war, one man after the next grasping for power, taking the principate by force, until your father finally emerged victorious and brought peace to our borders. We must remain vigilant in order to ensure such evil does not happen again . . .

But I digress.

You are, no doubt, wondering why I've come to the Bay first, rather than Rome. The answer is simple: I am on the hunt for a summer home – an obvious necessity if I am to be resident of Rome once again. I'd sent my freedman Jecundus weeks ahead of me to secure a suitable residence.

But his choice was terrible. It was too small, coldly designed and terribly outdated: frescoes in the old style, two-tone mosaics, et cetera, et cetera. It was, simply put, a calamity. In the end, however, there was no harm done. Just yesterday I sold the outdated abomination and purchased a home more to my liking. It is, in a word, perfect. It has all of the modern amenities, including a pond of lampreys and spectacular mosaics. The location is also exquisite: the breeze from the sea is pleasant, the temperature warm-to-moderate, and the view of the blue Tyrrhenian is stunning. It is a good distance from the orgies of Baiae and the barracks of Miscenum. The perfect retreat and only a day's ride south of Rome. I look forward to having you visit.

But enough of myself: enough of the trivial concerns of a private citizen. I will now relate a story that – if correct – could concern the safety and security of the Emperor.

There is a woman here, introduced to me by my freedman Jecundus – a whore if you must know, whom Jecundus met after several weeks at sea – who claims to have information concerning some sort of plot against your father. Two weeks ago she told her story to Jecundus (I shall not pollute my letter with the 'why' and the 'how'). Before I could track her down and have her explain the tale in more detail, she went missing. For days, Jecundus and I searched for her. But then, in the end, we happened upon her by chance – in the market, of all places. The woman was frightened when we confronted her, but in the end she proved quite forthcoming.

She calls herself 'Red'. You are, no doubt, picturing an inferno of red hair on the top of her head; however, I assure you, the name is a misnomer. (Her hair is a common, muddy brown.) She has given herself the title on account of the passion to which every man who beds her will – so she says – inevitably succumb. It seems an effective method of trade. Many will hear her name and think, I'll have to see what all the fuss is about. (As Jecundus can attest.) In fact, despite her low birth and occupation, she is not altogether uninteresting. In addition to her idiosyncratic adopted cognomen, she carries herself with considerable dignity during the day, as though she were patrician born, not a prostitute, without the slightest hint of irony. You should have seen her

in the market when we confronted her, Titus. It was as though a slave had disturbed a king.

We had a long talk, she and I. It is difficult to sift fact from fiction, given her state of agitation. She is scared and recalls the incident with a growing sense of irrationality. In any event, this is what she says.

Seven days ago, she attended the home of a Pompeian knight by the name of Vettius. It was late when she arrived, well after sunset. He took her to the atrium. After drinking some unmixed wine, he had her disrobe. He was, I presume, about to begin, when there was a knock on the door. Concerned that it could be his wife – or so he said, what wife would knock on her own door? – he told the woman to hide behind a curtain. The material was such that with her eyes close to the fabric, she could see through it, while those in the dimly lit atrium could not see her. So, hiding behind the drapes, stark naked and shivering, she watched as four men burst into the room. Her knight tried to run, but two of the intruders caught him and held him to a chair; a blade was brandished and pressed to the knight's neck.

The story becomes harder to follow at this point. I gather that the knight was asked a series of questions. He shook his head again and again, until he began to cry. One of the four, apparently not appreciating the responses, gave some signal to the others, and the knight was gagged and then rolled up in a carpet. Two of the men heaved the carpet onto their shoulders, and then off they went.

There is, of course, more. I would not waste the prefect's time with the disappearance of a mere Pompeian knight. The whore swears on her life that amongst the questions put to the man, she heard the words 'poison' and 'Caesar'. This is what she told Jecundus several days ago; and this is what she repeated to me. I pressed her for specifics, but she had none to give.

It is frustrating we do not have all the answers, but we are moving in the right direction. After some quibbling over price, she agreed to go with Jecundus and me tomorrow to the victim's home. She is quite scared of what she knows, or what she thinks she knows, but she could not resist the promise of compensation. She is a whore, after all.

In all likelihood, it is merely a false alarm. I cannot imagine anyone foolish enough to cross the Emperor, especially after the hard line you

took here less than a month ago. In any event, I will investigate and determine exactly what is going on. I aim to return to Rome in three days time, before the Agonalia. I shall tell you in person all that I have learned. Leave it to me. I owe you and your father much. I will not let you down.

Yours,

Lucius Plautius

I read the letter twice before yelling for Ptolemy. He arrives out of breath.

‘This letter is dated the fifth of January. Why am I only getting it now? Campania is a day’s journey away.’

Ptolemy shrugs. ‘It arrived last night.’

‘Has Plautius come to see me?’

Ptolemy shakes his head.

‘Have there been any more letters from him?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Ptolemy says.

‘Are you certain?’

‘Yes. That –’ he points at the letter in my hand ‘– is the only letter we have received from Plautius in months. Why? What’s wrong?’

The procession snakes its way through the forum in rows of two. Oxblood red togas mark the occasion. I alone stand out in my cuirass, polished steel embossed with golden hawks, wings spread wide. Buildings of cream-coloured brick and gleaming marble loom on either side. Somewhere the sun is rising, but it’s hidden by January’s cold, grey haze.

We haven’t moved for some time. Each man wages his own private battle to stay warm: shifting his weight back and forth, rubbing his hands together, or tucking his chin down into the folds of his toga. Some commit a small sacrilege by inviting an attendant slave to enter the procession to rub or hug their patron until the line starts to move again.

In front of me, at the head of the procession, one priest is pulling on a ram’s leash, trying to drag it up the temple steps. His colleague pushes on the animal’s haunches. They push and pull but the ram

won't budge. The animal's victory is complete when both men have to pause to catch their breath, each bending at the waist like two runners after crossing the finish line. I'm reminded of a joke, one my men tell after too much wine: how many priests does it take? But I can't recall the punch line.

'Cousin,' I say, 'don't you have a better way to get the animal to the altar?'

'Of course, Titus, of course,' Sabinus says without offering an alternative. He, like the other priests, wears the long folds of his burgundy toga over his head like a hood, the requisite reverence for the gods above. Despite the cold, his forehead and round, pink cheeks are spotted with a nervous sheen.

It was a mistake to name him pontiff. For years I'd warned against giving him any appointment, let alone one of the city's most prestigious. But after Baiae Father insisted. 'We need to close ranks,' he said. 'Only use men we can trust.' This year he filled the colleges and Imperial posts with only those with proven loyalty to the party, particularly our relations, with no regard to capability. He chose loyalty over competence, which is fine in theory; in practice, however, the logic isn't sound. What good is loyalty if the regime is a laughing stock?

The two priests start again, pushing and pulling, groaning as though they're relieving themselves on the temple steps.

The ram doesn't move.

I can feel the vigour with which I began the day slowly start to seep from my bones. Seneca teaches that anger is the most dangerous of all the passions, that it robs a man of reason and harms the man who wields it as much as the target. Lately, after these last few years confined to the capital, I've wondered whether he was wrong, whether it is frustration – not anger – that is the most damaging. At least, as Aristotle says, anger can help focus the mind in order to work towards a result. Frustration, on the other hand, sucks the life from you, one day at a time.

The priests pause again to catch their breath. The ram nibbles on one of their togas. Behind me, someone suppresses a laugh. I take a deep breath.

'Allow me, cousin,' I say to Sabinus.

I walk towards the ram, drawing the sword at my hip. With a nod of my head, I signal for the second priest, the one overseeing the ram's arse, to move. I draw the sword back and swing. Using the broad side of the blade, I hit the animal firmly on its backside. Startled, it trots up the temple steps. Roles reversed: the ram drags the priest with the leash up the steps and onto the portico.

I retake my place beside cousin Sabinus and the procession starts again.

We climb the temple steps, thirty or so, and pass between two grooved marble columns – two of twelve that ring the Temple of Concord's massive rectangular porch. It's darker here, in the pediment's shadow, a dusk-like grey, broken only by the hearth's fiery glow. Dozens of temple slaves mill about, naked from the waist up. Smoky tendrils of incense waft through the air: rosemary, frankincense and others I can't place. The temple's doors sit slightly ajar.

The portico continues to fill. Conversations – none higher than a whisper – overtake the quiet.

Cousin Sabinus takes his leave and heads to the altar.

Flames crackle and spit. Behind me, a senator lets out a sacrilegious chuckle.

I turn and scan the crowd looking for Plautius. His letter was dated four days ago, plenty of time for him to make his way from Baiae to Rome. Plautius has always had a flair for the dramatic, but his letter has piqued my interest. I would like to hear what he stumbled upon in the south. But behind me, amongst a sea of burgundy-hooded priests and bareheaded attendants scattered across the portico, the temple steps, and spilling out into the forum itself, I see many of the city's elite, but no Plautius.

'Good morning, my prince,' a voice over my shoulder says. I turn to see Senator Eprius Marcellus. In the morning's grey light, old Marcellus is all divots and curves: bent back, gaunt cheeks, protruding brow. With his weathered, scaly skin and narrow eyes, he looks more snake than man.

'Marcellus,' I say.

A young temple slave slips by on padded feet.

‘Do you think it will be long before we resume?’ Marcellus nods his head towards the hearth. Cousin Sabinus and another priest are arguing in whispers. The former is pointing at the ram, the latter at the hearth. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but it’s obvious they’re arguing about what step to take next. The pause between procession and sacrifice is slowly shifting from acceptable to mildly embarrassing.

‘Resume would mean the ceremony has stopped,’ I say. ‘It hasn’t.’

I can feel the eyes of the other men on the portico. It’s a familiar sensation in Rome: a room full of eyes, watching and weighing, noting every gesture, recording every little tic. If only I could have held my soldiers’ attention like this on campaign. Jerusalem would have fallen in a day.

‘It seems ironic, doesn’t it?’ Marcellus asks.

‘What does?’

‘To make the god of beginnings wait for his rites to be performed.’

Most men in this room are terrified of me. Rightly or wrongly, they see me as the Emperor’s attack dog. Very few would dare talk to me the way Marcellus does, or make a joke at the regime’s expense. Marcellus, however, is very rich and very patrician. He simply doesn’t have it in him to bow and scrape to a provincial like myself, someone who can’t trace his origins to one of Rome’s founding, patrician families, no matter what office my father currently holds. He was once a great friend to our family. Father relied on him, especially during the regime’s early years, after Nero’s suicide and the civil wars that followed. But the relationship has become strained. His cousin Iulus was implicated in Baiae, but the rot began before that. It’s hard to pinpoint when or why.

I say, ‘I doubt that Janus will care when the ram is cut.’

‘Well,’ Marcellus says, ‘I suppose I should take the word of a prince on issues of theology over a mere senator.’ The comment is meant to annoy, so I ignore it. Marcellus presses on. ‘Your father is not in attendance this year? I recall him attending last year. And the year before that.’

‘He is feeling under the weather.’

‘Well, I hope your father hasn’t found that he has grown too great for the Agonalia. It has a long history in Rome. His decision not to attend could be viewed by some as . . . distasteful.’

‘Some?’ A bolt of frustration travels up my spine. ‘I trust you do not share such sentiment. My presence – the emperor’s oldest son and prefect of the Praetorian Guard – should be honour enough for the Agonalia. Wouldn’t you agree?’

I’d meant my reply to sound witty, a snappy retort, but I’ve missed the mark. It sounded petty, like spouses arguing in public.

‘Of course, Titus,’ Marcellus says. His expression is cold and impossible to read. ‘If you will excuse me.’

He gives a slight nod before pushing his way through the crowd.

That was a mistake – a mistake but not a fatal one. Marcellus will get over it. It’s too early to talk with that viper.

I turn my attention back to the altar. Thankfully, temple slaves have taken over from the inexperienced priests, my hopeless cousin included. One slave is tending the hearth; another two are collaring the ram.

‘Good morning, Titus.’

Another voice over my shoulder. I turn to see Cocceius Nerva. The senator is short, nearly a full foot shorter than me, and with a large alp of a nose, which today is sticking out from under his priestly hood.

‘Nerva,’ I say.

‘Was Marcellus giving you a hard time?’ Nerva’s voice – as always – is calm, controlled and a touch too quiet. It’s an ingenious way to counter his height disadvantage: it requires his interlocutors to, as I am doing now, lean forward or even crouch to hear what he has to say.

‘Isn’t he always?’

‘I have to hand it to him,’ he says. ‘The confidence he must possess to annoy you, the great general.’

‘Politics is a different animal. In Rome, he’s the seasoned veteran.’

‘Still,’ Nerva says. ‘After Baiae, I’d have thought he’d proceed with a little more caution.’

I don’t respond. What happened in Baiae is not something I wish to discuss. But Nerva – who has survived the rise and fall of six emperors – is expert in ensuring he does not lose favour with whatever regime is in power. Sensing my discomfort, he changes the subject seamlessly. ‘Any news from Thrace?’

‘Nothing of substance.’

‘Shouldn’t Cerialis have the False Nero in chains by now?’

I smile. ‘I’m always surprised at the impatience of senators. Wars take time, even small ones. Cerialis is a force of nature. I don’t doubt that we will hear of his victory any day now.’

Nerva bows in an exaggerated way to show defeat.

I ask, ‘Do you know Lucius Plautius?’

‘Not well,’ Nerva says. ‘We’ve only met a handful of times. Where is he posted? Syria?’

‘He was,’ I say. ‘His term ended a few months ago.’

‘You must know him well from the war.’

‘I do,’ I say. ‘I received a letter from him this morning. He was in Baiae, but the letter was dated several days ago.’

‘The post is unreliable these days, isn’t it?’

I study Nerva, weighing his tone. Is he asking for another appointment? Father has already been quite generous – though like Marcellus, he is not as close to Father as he once was. This is what Rome has done to me. I worry that evil lurks behind every comment. If a man says, tomorrow it will rain, I think he’s plotting murder. If he says it will be sunny and temperate, I think the murder is already done and the blade wiped clean.

A bell finally rings and cousin Sabinus begins a low, steady chant. Two priests attend to the ram, the same two who had tried but failed to bring it inside. One dribbles wine onto the ram’s head. The second follows with a cake of spelt, crumbling it in his hands. White crumbs fall like flakes of snow before embedding in the ram’s wine-soaked fur. The priests step back and the slaves step forward. One grabs the animal’s chest, the other its back legs. An older slave with a white beard and protruding ribs stands directly behind the animal. He grabs the ram’s chin and pulls it up, exposing the neck. He brandishes a knife with his free hand and, in one swift movement, he slits the animal’s throat. Thick, dark-purple blood pours out of the animal’s neck and splashes onto the temple floor. A puddle collects at the ram’s feet. Cousin Sabinus flinches and momentarily suspends his chanting.

Gods, please tell me no one saw our new pontiff swoon at the sight of blood.

The ram's body relaxes as the last whispers of life run from its limbs. The old slave with the knife runs the blade along the animal's chest and belly. The skin silently parts, revealing the animal's pink insides; ribbons of steam twist up into the cold air. The slave cuts off a piece of flesh and hands it to one of the priests, who then tosses the meat onto the bright, burning coals in the hearth.

Cousin Sabinus resumes his chanting but in a softer voice than before – so soft that it's difficult to make out the words. At least now no one will hear if he makes a mistake.

The old slave with the knife begins to pull the animal's insides out of the cadaver and onto a silver plate. The wet, slapping sound overtakes cousin Sabinus's chanting. A haruspex walks to the altar and begins inspecting the entrails. His colleague takes notes, pressing his stylus into a wax tablet. The temple slaves begin carving up the ram's carcass, which will be handed out to the poor in the forum later today.

When the haruspice are finished, a bell chimes again marking the end of the ceremony. The crowd takes its time in exiting the temple. Many forgo a quick exit and casually resume discussions amongst themselves. Nerva takes his leave. I stay where I am, hoping to avoid conversing with another senator. I've had my fill for the day.

Suddenly there is a commotion somewhere in the crowd, and an excited hum travels from one man to the next. I watch as the throng – first in the forum, then on the temple steps – slowly parts, making way for an invisible traveller. Eyes are aimed down. A few look indignant, others amused. Finally, materialising from a break in the crowd, I see a mutt – bulging ribs, brown hide with spots of black – casually trotting up the temple steps and onto the portico. The animal arrives unmolested at the altar and stops.

She's holding something in her mouth. Saliva drips from her bared teeth.

The throng mutters.

'A stray,' someone says.

I signal to a slave to remove the dog. But before he can reach it, the animal turns, faces the crowd and opens its mouth. Whatever it was carrying drops to the temple floor. The slave bends down to pick it up. He stops. His eyes widen, filled with terror. I walk towards the dog. Before I reach it, I realise what it dropped; so too does the crowd. The men talk excitedly. One man cries out; others laugh. I hear the word 'omen'.

Once I reach the dog, I squat to take a closer look.

Lying strewn on the portico is the hand of a grown man, severed at the wrist, palm up, with its fingers curved towards the gods. My eyes fix on the signet ring – the thick, gold ring of a senator or knight – glistening with the sheen of the dog's saliva.

The ring spins on my desk: a gold, mesmerising blur. The revolutions slow and it begins to wobble, like a drunk at the end of the night, before finally toppling over. I pick the ring up and hold it to the lamp's flame. The ring's inscription has been scratched away with a series of frenzied scores, making it impossible to read; any clue of its former owner now buried and lost. This, of course, I already knew. But frustration and a lack of a better idea compel me to check again. Once I'm finished, I place the ring back on the desk and spin.

The mutt interrupts my train of thought with a whimper. I look down at the bear hide spread out on the floor. She is curled up on top, sound asleep. Her leg muscles twitch as she dreams. She is somewhere else, chasing game. A hare, maybe. Lucky girl. She has no idea the trouble she's caused. Soon the whole city will be talking about her – if they aren't already.

Maybe I made a mistake taking the ring, but I had to think quickly. When I realised it was a senator or knight's ring on the hand, lying there on the temple floor, I removed it before anyone noticed. I thought I would be able to determine the owner. I didn't want the ring starting talk of a murdered senator – if that's actually what happened. As for the mutt, I'm not sure why I brought her back to the palace. But she's relevant somehow. Who knows, maybe she'll shit out something useful.

‘Master.’

Ptolemy is standing across the room holding a lamp. His face palpitates in a yellow shade.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry to disturb you. Regulus is here. He says you are expecting him.’

‘Send him in.’

Moments later Ptolemy returns with Regulus. The young man looks immaculate, even at this hour: a fresh shave, stainless red cape, polished cuirass, the hint of lavender – every inch the patrician blue-blood I have resented my whole life. He has never seen a battlefield and yet, because of his connections, here he is, a military tribune in the Praetorian guard.

‘Titus,’ Regulus says. He stands at attention when addressing me, as he should, but he lacks the rigor one can only learn under the conditions of war. That pretentious purse of his would never last in the barracks.

‘What do you have for me?’

‘Exactly what you asked for,’ he says. ‘A list of every senator and a list of every appointment abroad.’

‘Good,’ I say. ‘Tomorrow, be here bright and early. We’re going door-to-door.’

Regulus looks incredulous. ‘Isn’t that . . . beneath us?’

I ignore the question. I hold out my hand and Regulus hands me the two rolls of papyrus.

‘May I?’ he says, pointing at the seat across from me, on the other side of the desk.

I stare at the young tribune, waiting to see if he has the gall to sit without my leave. He doesn’t sit, but he continues to speak, still brimming with confidence.

‘Can I speak freely, sir?’

He takes my silence as leave.

‘It seems to me the party is at a bit of a crisis point. There are people out there disparaging your father. Disparaging *Caesar*. I don’t know what you have planned tomorrow by going door-to-door, but I’m not sure if it will be as effective as other avenues. I’ve been told that there

are those who would talk. Well-meaning citizens who could provide us with information about our enemies.'

'I think, Regulus, the word you are looking for is *informer*. You have informers waiting to provide us with information. You're not suggesting that we use informers, are you? Or do I need to provide you with a history lesson?'

Regulus thinks my questions are rhetorical. He just stands there with his mouth slightly pursed.

'How old are you?' I ask.

'Twenty-two.'

'Twenty-two. So that would make you how old during Nero's last great purge, after Piso and his accomplices were discovered? Eight?'

'Thereabouts,' he says. 'Maybe seven.'

'And did you lose anyone during that purge?'

'My uncle.'

'Your uncle. On which side? Was he of the Regulii?'

'No. He was my mother's brother. A Sulpicii,' Regulus says. 'I'm not sure what you're getting at. My uncle was a traitor. He was in league with Piso, Scaevinus and all the rest. He provided them with money, information and who knows what else. Nero was perfectly within his rights to have him killed.' Regulus' voice is rising. He hadn't planned on this becoming personal. 'I'm surprised you're acting so naive. Emperors occasionally have to take drastic measures. Otherwise, they're done. It's that simple. Nero did it with Piso and he held on to power; and it was his failure to do it again with Galba that guaranteed his downfall. If he'd done what was necessary, if he had found each and every one of Galba's supporters and killed them, as was his Imperial right, then he'd still be alive and in power today.'

The nerve of this spoilt shit. He speaks as though this is my first week on the job, as though I haven't been fighting to keep Father in power for nearly a decade, sniffing out plots, stamping them out before they can bloom. He speaks as though it would be *his* throat slit in a coup – rather than Father's and mine.

I get up from my desk and walk to the wine. It's airing out in a bowl on a side table. I have to step over the dog to get there. She's still sound asleep, but her whimpering has stopped. Maybe she caught that hare. I dip two

glasses into the bowl, and then pour seawater from a terracotta pitcher into the cups, diluting the blend. I only add a splash. Tonight we both need something strong. I hand one to Regulus and then motion for him to sit. I take a seat facing the young tribune.

Now that I've calmed down, I can proceed with more precision. I start again.

'I wonder,' I say, 'did you see any of your uncle's transgressions? Did you see him hand gold pieces to Piso or Scaevinus? Did you see him at any of the conspirators' clandestine meetings? Did you see him put up his hand, volunteering information?'

'I was seven. Obviously not.'

'But you're certain he did such things. You're just not sure how you know what you know.' I pause to take a sip of wine. It burns the back of my throat as it goes down. It's the sour variety, the type that only the legions drink: a thick, acidic blend that is as impervious to time and temperature as any soldier. After all my years on campaign, it's all I can drink. The higher-end vintages from Spain or Italy taste like water now. 'May I ask what happened to his estate?'

'Nero confiscated most of it. My other uncle, his younger brother, was allowed to retain his real estate holdings in Italy,' Regulus says. He raises the cup, takes one whiff and his face contorts like a child asked to eat his vegetables. He lowers the cup without taking a sip. 'But that's common practice,' he adds.

'There,' I say, 'you've hit the nail on the head.' I take another sip of wine. It burns less this time. 'Informers often stand to benefit from their informing. It's implicit in the act. Why else inform?'

'For the good of the Empire,' Regulus says. 'For the good of Rome.'

'I thought you frowned on naiveté.'

'You think my uncle was betrayed by his own brother?' Regulus asks, incredulous.

'That I do not know. What I *do* know is that informers, like everyone in this city, are only looking out for themselves. You can often trace the source of a man's ruin to where the spoils land. Maybe others stood to benefit from your uncle's demise. Maybe *they* are the reason for his ruin. I don't know. But I would be surprised if he – the uncle accused

of conspiring – was actually involved. I’ve never heard of your uncle. I can’t imagine he was an integral part of a plot to overthrow Nero.’

Regulus is quiet for a moment. When he speaks again his voice has a new bitterness to it. ‘Speculate all you like,’ he says. ‘But culling disloyal citizens ensures stability. It guarantees power remains intact. Tiberius ruled for eighteen years using informers to locate and purge his enemies. And Nero’s failure to do this was his downfall.’

‘Tiberius was Augustus’ heir,’ I say. ‘He could have ruled for another eighteen if he’d done away with the practice.’ The rumour – never proven but to which I subscribe – was that Tiberius was suffocated with a pillow by his unhappy staff. ‘Informers and purges didn’t prevent his downfall. They caused it. And no purge would have stopped what happened to Nero. Legions in Gaul and Spain revolted and the Praetorians turned on him. Then, with the help of his freedman, he took his own life. No purge of the senatorial ranks could have stopped that.’

I take another sip of wine before continuing. I’m going slowly now. I’m enjoying watching the look of contrition form on this pretty, patrician boy’s face.

‘It’s unfortunate that you haven’t had more time on campaign,’ I say. ‘All you’ve ever known is Rome so it’s hard for you to see it for what it really is.’

Regulus bristles. ‘I’ve been throughout Italy, and to Greece and Egypt.’

‘Those are recreations of Rome but on a smaller scale,’ I say. ‘Miniature Romes but with different weather and systems of roads that make sense. The provinces are merely copies of the capital. The system of government, laws and regulations – everything is the same. The people are the same as well, though again on a smaller scale. Less rich, less ambitious – but Roman nonetheless.’ I lean back into my chair, hoping to show how at ease I am. ‘No. There’s nothing you can learn about Rome by visiting miniature Romes. But on campaign, after only a few days living as a soldier, you would know more about Rome than from another ten years living here.’

Regulus looks unimpressed. He may have rolled his eyes, but I can’t say for certain in the lamp’s dim light.

‘It’s true,’ I continue. ‘The selfishness of this city, the unchecked greed, and the obsession with status – all of this is obvious to the soldier. It’s obvious because the life of a soldier is different. By necessity it is the very opposite. Selfishness in an individual will get the group killed. The army must work as one unit not only to conquer, but to survive. In Rome, a selfish man is rewarded with his dead brother’s farm and widow. In the field, however, a selfish man is rewarded with death. If you lived as a soldier, even for a short while, you’d see that. You’d view these *helpful* citizens wishing to inform on their fellow Romans with scepticism. Their motivation would be obvious.’ I tilt my head back and drain the last drops from my cup. ‘Informers, like everyone in this city, are only looking out for themselves. You would do well to remember that.’

‘And how was Baiae any different?’ Regulus asks. ‘You cut down two men without so much as a trial.’

The boy catches me off guard. I let my pettiness distract me.

‘In Baiae there were no informers. There was no purge,’ I say, without much conviction. It’s now my turn to let emotion seep into my voice. ‘Those men plotted openly against the Emperor. I saw their treachery with my own eyes. There was no opportunity for a trial, nor was there any need for one.’

Regulus is at a loss. The purse to his lips is back. He didn’t like my answer any more than I did.

‘It’s late,’ I say. ‘Go home to that pretty wife of yours. Be here tomorrow before sunrise.’

Regulus gets up to go. He places the glass of wine on the desk. The cup is full.

‘Bad luck, that,’ I say, pointing at the wine.

Regulus reluctantly picks up the cup. He looks at it like Julia looks at her vegetables. But I will say this for the boy: he has manners. In one fell swoop, he tilts his head back and drains the cup. He coughs violently – so much so that he has to place his hands on my desk to brace himself. The mutt wakes up and raises her head from the rug to watch the commotion.

‘I don’t know how you drink that swill,’ he says.

‘I’m a soldier,’ I say. ‘Remember: bright and early tomorrow morning.’

Regulus salutes me before turning to go.

Absently, I turn back to my correspondence, unrolling a letter from the governor of Gaul. But before I've read more than two words, I hear someone clear his throat. I look up to see Virgilius standing at attention. I nod my head and the centurion relaxes. I gesture at the chair opposite my desk.

'General,' he says before taking a seat.

My old friend's presence immediately puts me at ease. He has a lean frame, a mop of white hair and a thick, salty beard. Old and battle-hardened, he is everything Regulus is not.

'How much of that did you hear?'

'Just the last bit,' he says. 'His uncle did it, if you ask me.'

I give the smile he was looking for.

'Did you find Plautius?' I ask.

'No. But his wife is here.'

'Did you speak with her?'

He shakes his head. 'Just the staff. They said Plautius was expected in Rome two weeks ago. But letters have been coming in from the Bay saying he's got further business to attend to.' Virgilius looks over at the mutt. 'You think that was his hand?'

I lean back in my chair. Plautius' letter is on my desk. *She heard the words 'poison' and 'Caesar', he wrote. I will investigate. Leave it to me.*

'I'm not sure,' I say, 'If it's not, I'd like to speak with him.'

'Should I go find him?' Virgilius asks. 'Or at least try to.'

'No. Not yet. I need you with me tomorrow. Domitian is there now.'

'Your brother is in Baiae?'

I nod. 'He's been there nearly a week, doing whatever it is young men do in Baiae. I will write to him. I will ask him to find Plautius. It will be good to put him to use.'

Virgilius nods, then asks: 'If that wasn't Plautius's hand, what do you make of it?'

'Accident or not, it will give us trouble. You know how this city loves omens.'

I don't need to say anything more. Virgilius knows me well enough to see I'm done talking. He stands and says, 'I will see you tomorrow then.'

He leaves.

I look again at the letters spread out on my desk. The dog – awake now – trots over and places her head onto my lap. Her large, dark eyes stare up at me lovingly.

‘If only you could talk,’ I say to her.

I pick the gold signet ring up and hold it to the light of the lamp’s flame. After I inspect those familiar scratches, I place the ring onto the desk and spin, losing myself in the gold, mesmerising blur.